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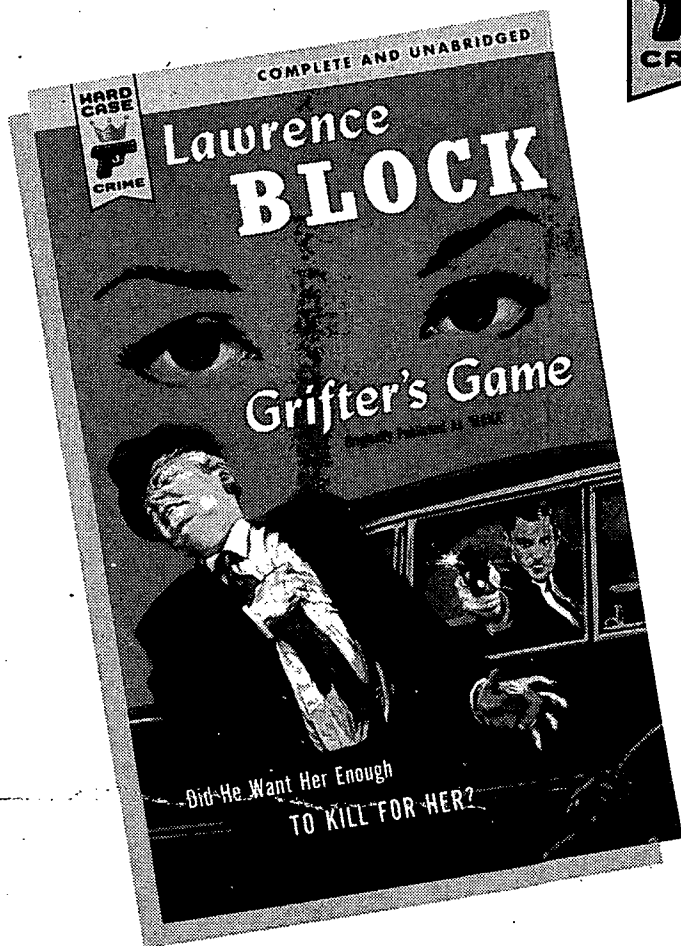
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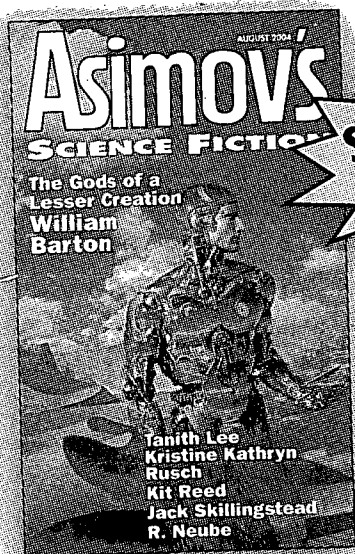
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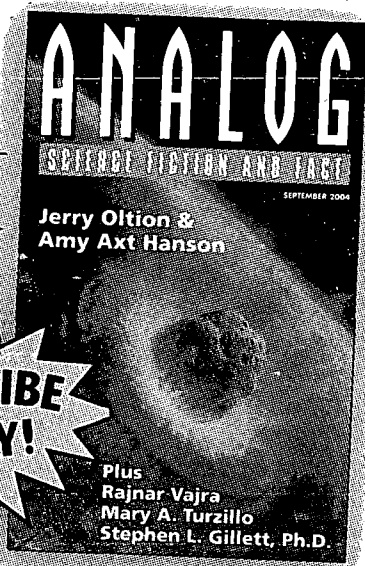
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SEASON'S GREETINGS

FROM THE STAFF OF AHMM



Helen Griffin

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THE BATHTUB MARY

JAMES T. SHANNON

I got the call a little after four in the morning. Trouble. At that time it had to be trouble, I thought groggily as I reached out to stop the damned cell phone beeping. I remembered I was on vacation, so the call couldn't be coming from the station. No, at this time it had to be family. Sondra, my wife, was muttering something in her sleep. Ashley and Jason, our two kids just pushing into their teens, were in their rooms down the hall. My mother, then. Or one of my sisters. Or . . . and I picked it up to hear that familiar scratchy voice rasping, "Gilbert, I need to see you."

"Now?" I said, hearing in my own voice the whiny kid she always managed to bring out in me.

"Of course now! You think I'd call you this early in the morning if I didn't want to see you now?"

"But, Vo, it's four o'clock."

"Young people sleep too much, Gilbert. You get to be my age, you begin to see what a waste of time all that sleeping is."

"And you live fifty miles away."

"I know where I live, Gilbert Souza. And I certainly wouldn't have called such a big-deal Boston police detective if it wasn't important."

"Okay, Vo," I said with a sigh that I didn't much try to hide. And I'd learned a long time ago that it was no use correcting her about my job. Putnam, where I live and work on the force, is a suburb of Boston, but not a big city, not by a long shot. "What's so important?"

"It's the Blessed Mother statue," she said. Then she added cryptically, "Somebody's going to die."

Knowing she had me about as hooked as any trout in the stream, my grandmother hung up.

I called back, of course, and since she was the woman she was,



and had caller ID, she didn't answer the phone, although I filled about two minutes on her answering machine asking her to pick up. Which left me with no alternative but to dress as quickly and quietly as I could in the dark, leave a note on the kitchen table for Sondra, and drive the fifty miles down to Fall River wondering all the way what the hell my *vo* was up to now.

Vo isn't actually my grandmother's name. It's the diminutive form of the Portuguese word for grandmother, *avo*, which is about right since my *vo* is the diminutive form of a grandmother. Barely five feet tall, even in her thick-soled sneakers, my *vo* was the only grownup I could look down on by the time I was thirteen. But no one, child or adult, priest or policeman, ever dared look down on my *vo*.

My grandmother never treated me with the adult condescension that all kids learn to hate early on, but she also didn't realize that she could embarrass a grandchild, who knew that when you stood out from the crowd, you only became a better target. Much of the embarrassment she caused me came out of her attachment to that Blessed Mother statue she had mentioned in her call, the bane of my youth, the Bathtub Mary.

As common as backyard gardens or pastel-sided triple-deckers in the Portuguese-dominated city of Fall River, the Bathtub Mary is what irreverent Catholic kids called those small shrines people placed in their yards. The shrines celebrate the appearance of the Blessed Mother to three shepherd children in Fatima, Portugal, in 1917.

As I'd always heard it, the Bathtub Mary actually began life decades ago as an old porcelain claw foot bathtub tossed out during an apartment renovation. Someone got the idea of burying the tub upended half in the ground, then placing a statue of the Blessed Mother in the resulting niche, so it sort of looked like a grotto. Landscape the back and sides of the tub and plant flowers in the front, and you've got yourself a shrine.

They became so popular that later innovators came up with precast cement grottos, which still managed to look pretty much like upended bathtubs. They later added statues of the kneeling shepherd children, resulting in a kind of year-round crèche.

But that wasn't good enough for my grandmother, whose own triple-decker was two streets away from her second home, Our Lady of Fatima Church. My *vo*'s statue of the Blessed Mary was life-sized—well, life-sized if Christ's mother had been the size of my grandmother. But back when I was eleven, she couldn't find any life-sized statues of the three kids to go in front of it. She

solved that problem by inviting the family, her three sons and two daughters and all of her grandkids, over for her semiannual meal of a *sopa*, which my cousins and I called "swamp soup" because it was full of spearmint and soggy bread. Since I was the only grandchild with guts enough to admit I hated this *sopa*, she told my parents, "Oh, and tell Gilbert I'll have lots of *chourico* pizza for him. And I've baked raisin squares for dessert."

She had the pizza, all right, covered with slices of *chourico*, the hot sausage I liked so much. And the raisin squares that I'd do almost anything for. Almost anything did not, however, include what she had in mind, a surprise for me and two of my cousins, Natalie and Norbina Oliveira. She had sewn costumes for us so we'd look like the three kids from Fatima. Now these were shepherd kids. From 1917. In the newspaper pictures taken of them, the two girls have these huge, dark scarves that fall halfway down their backs. The boy is wearing some kind of weird, overblown turban-like affair that hangs off the back of his head like a sack that he's using to steal a watermelon. Besides the headwear, my grandmother had been historically accurate with the girls' ballooning dresses and the boy's dark little jacket. Slick maybe for shepherd kids in Portugal in 1917, but not the fashion statement for an eleven year old in the early '80s who wanted to dye his black hair blond so he could pass for a midget version of Sting.

My mom, Vo's daughter, gave me up like a Spartan mother sending her son off to the army, and she didn't even flinch when I came out of Vo's spare bedroom practically radioactive with embarrassment. My grandmother, followed by the obedient herd of everyone else in the family, marched me and my cousins out to her back yard and had the three of us kneel in front of the statue. Then my chubby, tech-crazy cousin, Victor Medeiros, seventeen and safely out of the running for shepherd boy, stood off to the side braying like a mule. Over and over he asked me to throw in a prayer for him while he took our pictures with his brand new Nikon F3 35 millimeter.

But my mortification didn't end there. My *vo* decided one of Victor's pictures was so nice that she sent it in to the local Portuguese weekly, where in what must have been a very slow news week it ended up on the front page.

For months after that it seemed to me that every kid in Our Lady of Fatima school came up with variations on Victor's tired "Pray for me, Gilbert" line, and since they all knew that the Blessed Mother had supposedly told the three children of Fatima predictions about the course of events in the world, they kept

asking me if Mary had told me anything worthwhile.

"Hey, Gilbert, any chances I'm gonna get a ColecoVision for Christmas?"

"How 'bout the Red Sox, Gilbert? Was one of her miracles the Sox finally winning the World Series?"

You get the picture. I got the picture, all right. I got the picture taped to my desk and my locker, taped to the back of my coat, taped to any schoolbook I happened to leave lying around.

It could've been worse, I suppose. If I'd been older, my classmates would probably have come up with more creative forms of torture. But this was bad enough, and though I knew most of the attacks were stupid, that still didn't keep them from bothering me.

In fact, as I drove down to Fall River in the early morning darkness, I could still remember them clearly, still feel that sharp sense of unfairness that kids never let go of. As for worrying about my *vo* saying that someone was going to die—well, considering the source, I didn't really take it too seriously.

On the other hand, almost every light in the third floor apartment of the triple-decker my grandmother owned seemed to be on. She insisted on staying on the third floor despite her age because she said she got extra heat coming up from the people below. And climbing the stairs was good exercise.

I could see her silhouette at the curtains of the front parlor, the only semidarkened room in the apartment, and she appeared to be cradling something that looked ominously familiar in her arms.

So I hustled up the two flights of stairs but was careful to stand off to the side as I rapped on the door.

"Who is it?"

"You know who it is, Vo. I saw you at the window."

"You alone, Gilbert?"

"Yes, of course I am. So will you please carefully put down Vô's shotgun and open the door?"

I heard the thunk as the stock of my late grandfather's old Remington .32 over-and-under hit the floor, then the slow turning of her lock.

"Took you long enough," she muttered, closing and locking the door behind me.

She was dressed in gray sweats, top and bottom. With her fly-away white hair and dark eyes, the only touch of color on my grandmother was the gold bracelet she always wore. It had cameos and the date of birth for each of her fourteen grandchildren, and we all jangled from her wrist with every move. Kind of like life. I was number eight.

"Sorry, I was slowed down by all that five A.M. traffic."

"This is no joking matter, Gilbert. No joke at all."

"Right. You said someone's going to die, and it's connected to the statue?"

"Did you see it?" she said, dark eyes blazing. "Did you see what they did to it? To the shrine of the Mother of God?"

"Uh, no, Vo. The statue's in the back yard. It's . . . well, it's still pretty dark out."

"They destroyed the boy, Gilbert! They knocked his head off, smashed him all to smithereens."

"You mean the statue of the boy in your shrine?"

"Yes, of course. The one you dressed up as."

My grandmother usually knows what buttons to push, but this wasn't one of those times. I had spent too much of my youth day-dreaming about taking a baseball bat to that statue myself.

"It was probably kids that did it, Vo," I said, trying to hide my concern that she had called me out for what seemed to be simple vandalism. My grandmother wasn't the kind of person who thought that way.

"No, it wasn't no kids, Gilbert," she said, her lips a thin, determined line. "It was that good-for-nothing, Tiago D. Costa."

Whoa, now that slowed me down. Tiago D. Costa was a name I'd been hearing ever since I was a kid. Always the full name, his middle initial as permanent a placement as George C. Scott's or James T. Kirk's. Tiago D. Costa. Although he was only seven years older than I was, graduating from Our Lady of Fatima with my cousin Victor's class, Tiago D. Costa quickly became a legend for his run-ins with authority. He had the fastest car in the city, the fastest fists. Soon he had the fastest rise to ownership of triple-deckers and small stores in the north end of the city. He was also rumored to have a piece of every illegal transaction that passed through the city, so much so that his name was mentioned three times in a Boston newspaper story about crime in New England.

"Tiago D. Costa broke your statue, Vo?"

"Damned straight, Gilbert. Either him or one of his flunkies."

"Why would he do that?"

My grandmother had a sudden flash of caution streak across her dark eyes. It was a look I'd seen too many times, even in a small town like Putnam, on people trying to hide some guilt from me.

"Vo?" I said. "Why would Tiago D. Costa break your statue?"

"I don't know, Gilbert. How would I know why anybody does anything? Especially an animal like him."

But she knew, I had no doubt about that. I also knew she wasn't about to tell me.

"You have to go talk to him, Gilbert," she said, her dark eyes worried, even a little frightened. I'd never seen her frightened, except maybe that night in the hospital when my aunt Lucy had been in an accident and . . .

"Who is it, Vo?"

"Who's what? I told you, that animal, Tiago D. Costa," she said, going over to her stove to get a frying pan.

"No, I mean who are you worried for? Who's really in trouble with Tiago here?"

She frowned, stared down at the frying pan where she was putting in slices of sweetbread she'd cut from a fat round loaf. I'd guessed right, no doubt about that. My grandmother only worried about two things: the potential closing of Our Lady of Fatima Church and bad things happening to people in the family.

"I need to know, Vo. If I'm gonna speak to him, I need to know."

She sighed, began toasting the bread in the frying pan as she muttered, "Maybe Victor. He could be in a little trouble."

"Victor? What's Victor got to do with Tiago D. attacking the Bath . . . uh, the shrine to Mary?"

"Talk to Tiago D.," she said, cracking a couple of eggs into the frying pan to go along with my sweetbread. "Just talk to him, Gilbert, that's all, that's all I'm asking you to do."

Victor. It figures. My cousin had turned his love of technology into a career as a private investigator. I'd heard that he'd recently begun to take ads on local cable, speaking both English and Portuguese and selling himself to the community with the label, "The Portuguese P.I."

My grandmother shuffled slowly to her refrigerator, suddenly looking very old. She had always looked old to me, but old like some ancient, tough tree planted so firmly in the ground that no wind could knock it over. Now she just looked old.

Five thirty. Okay, if Victor was responsible for my being awakened at four, I could get him up now.

"What's Victor's number, Vo?" I said, holding up my cell phone and hoping she wouldn't know that my phone could store all the numbers I needed. Victor's had never been one of them.

"Don't call him, Gilbert. I don't want him to know I called you. All I want you to do is talk to Tiago D. Costa."

"Well, if you're not gonna tell me what you know, I have to ask Victor. I mean, I can't just go in and face down Tiago without knowing what I'm talking about."

"You'll be talking about the destruction of part of my shrine to the Blessed Mother, Gilbert. And don't you have a badge that will put the shakes even in a crumb like Tiago?"

No point in telling her that that wasn't the way it worked. Tiago would know my Putnam shield would have no real weight down here. Also no point in telling her that Tiago D. Costa had always been the shadow at the end of the dark street of my mind, half hero, half bogeyman, all intimidating legend of my childhood.

"I don't suppose you'd know where I could find Tiago?"

Her smile was a small one that flickered off quickly, but I still felt as if she'd just mentally whispered, "Checkmate."

"He's usually down at that lousy club of his around the corner by eleven or so," she said, and to reward me she took a length of *chourico* that she must have fried earlier out of her refrigerator and began chopping off big slices to toss in the pan with the eggs and sweetbread.

Tiago's "club" was actually a bar called the Ace, and my grandmother had always hated the place, even before Tiago owned it. She also had always described it as "around the corner." The front of it was, but its back entrance and rear parking lot were snuggled up against my *vo*'s back yard, just on the other side of her chain-link fence.

When I was little and used to sleep over here some weekends with my sisters, we liked to sneak out of bed late at night and peek out the kitchen window, giggling at the drunks reeling through the parking lot down there.

My *vo* had caught us doing it once. The next morning at breakfast she had kept hinting to my *vô* about "that thing we talked about," and from the way my grandfather kept glancing over at us, we knew she'd rattled us out.

When we came back the next weekend, we found out the "thing" they had talked about was planting a row of arborvitae along this side of their backyard fence. The shrubs were only about two feet high, and it would be a few years before they'd actually block the view of the Ace's back lot from the third floor window. My poor grandfather, torn between being economical and protecting his *netos* from the evils of the world, had really done neither.

I walked to that back window now. The line of arborvitae had long outlived my *vô*; the trees had grown tall while he had faded, and had finally succeeded in keeping the view of the back door and back lot from the prying eyes of his grandson.

Over in the far corner of the yard, just past the end of the line

of arborvitae, I could see the shrine. The Blessed Mother still had her hands held open and out, the two girls still prayed to her. But the boy lay shattered, his hands clasped together on the lawn, his head smashed, as my grandmother had said, to smithereens.

To the left and two streets over I could see the cross on the top of Our Lady of Fatima Church, which like so many other churches around here was barely hanging on. Already the diocese had closed a number of churches, consolidating them, sometimes crunching as many as three parishes into one.

It was the topic everyone tried to avoid at family get-togethers because it always upset my grandmother, who had been baptized, confirmed, and married in that church, and, we all knew, planned to be buried out of it as well.

She scooped the sweetbread, eggs, and *chourico* onto a plate and brought the plate over to the table. Now that I had agreed to talk to Tiago D., she suddenly didn't look so old any more.

She smiled as she watched me eat. Food was love for her, brought up as she was during the Depression when sometimes there wasn't much food around. The food was good too, but I think I would have enjoyed it a little more if the shadow of Tiago D. Costa wasn't hovering over every bite I took.

There was nothing else to do after I ate, and it was still too early to call home. My grandmother caught my second yawn and nagged me into taking a nap in her spare bedroom. I thought I was just humoring her, but I was asleep in that old bed I used to love within five minutes.

The Ace, which had always looked run down when I was a kid, had a new face of sand-colored bricks. Though I've seen the inside of a few of the city's bars, I'd never been in the Ace. I was always sure my grandmother's eyes were frowning down, right through the quickly growing shield of arborvitae, from her third floor kitchen window.

I could hear a buzzer go off in back as I opened the bar's front door, could see the video camera in the far left corner checking me out. Lots of caution for a small, neighborhood bar—though maybe not for the headquarters of Tiago D. Costa.

It looked as if the renovations had stopped with the new brick front and the surveillance equipment. The inside, dark and smelling like an early Sunday morning after a very late Saturday night, was deserted. Couldn't blame people for staying away. The dark wood of the long bar was almost obliterated by nicks and

burn spots. The stools, small tables, chairs, looked as if they'd been picked up curbside on trash day. The only thing that looked new and clean was the green felt surface of the pool table.

The door buzzer brought a tall, thin guy through a door to the back. He had the kind of pale complexion that made you wonder if he ever went outside. He must have decided that I wasn't one of the occasional eleven A.M. drinkers they get because he stood with crossed arms and made no move toward the bar.

"What?" he said, with the kind of look my wife gets when she realizes it's a telemarketer on the phone.

"I want to talk to Tiago D. Costa."

"He expecting you?"

"I dunno. Why don't you ask him?" I said, nodding up at the ceiling-mounted camera.

Hell, Tiago must be back there, and he must have seen me on his monitor.

Confirming my guess, we both heard the troll voice from out back calling, "Send 'im in, for chrissakes!"

The pale guy said, "You can go in," as if he'd just made up his mind.

Whenever I come back to the city of my childhood, I notice how things have shrunk. The trees I used to climb, my grammar school, that bed in my *vo's* spare room. I supposed in the back of my mind I was hoping that Tiago D. Costa had shrunk too. No such luck. He had a few gray hairs at his temple, but looking up from behind a small steel desk he was every bit as broad and carved from stone as I remembered him. His white short-sleeved shirt was tight around his muscled upper arms. His thick hands, folded comfortably on the desktop, looked as if they could still punch out anyone or anything that got in his way, and his dark eyes had kept that dangerous, flat stare that used to make me change direction or cross the street when I was a kid.

"Whattaya want?" he said, his voice as dark and as uninflected as his eyes.

"I'm the grandson of the lady lives in the yard behind this place, the yard with the Bathtub Mary in it."

"I know who you are," he said. "I asked you what you wanted."

I've been on the other side of so many interrogations that I knew instinctively I was already at a disadvantage. He had let me know that he had information about me, but not how much or how he intended to use it.

"Somebody destroyed one of her statues," I said. "She thinks you're the one had it done."

What the hell, might as well go with the truth no matter how lame it sounded.

"You're Victor Medeiros's cousin," he said.

"Yeah."

"Victor, the Portagee private eye."

I waited, thinking maybe he was pushing his early advantage.

"You're Gilbert Souza, right? You're a cop in some punk town up near Boston."

Okay, now he was just showing off.

"About the statue," I said.

"You might want to talk to your cousin about it."

"He wasn't home," I said, unblinking so he wouldn't catch the lie.

"Your grandmother, then."

"She's the one asked me to speak to you. She was worried that maybe you had it in for Victor for some reason."

For the first time I thought I caught a glint of something that looked suspiciously like humor in those flat eyes.

"You're a cop, Gilbert," he said, tilting his chin to one side. "You know what blackmail is?"

"Blackmail?" I said, though I had heard him clearly, and any rookie on the force would know that I was just trying to buy a little time to figure out what the hell we were talking about here.

He nodded, pulled a thin, leather cigar case from his shirt pocket, removed an even thinner cigar, and lit it up. The gesture reminded me of the tapes I'd seen of old Celtic games, with Red Auerbach lighting up one of his victory cigars before he left the court at the Boston Garden.

"And Victor's connected . . . how?"

He blew a narrow stream of smoke toward the already browned ceiling tiles, then fixed me with that stare and said, "Why don't you go ask the Portagee P.I. about his tape?"

"I will," I said, getting up, not sure what the hell we were talking about. A blackmail tape? "Can we put any other actions on hold while I do so?"

"If it stops here, I'll let it stop here," he said. "But that depends on your cousin . . . and your grandmother."

Victor's office was in a small strip mall on the far side of the city. Two of the stores were empty and there weren't many cars in front of the others. MEDEIROS INVESTIGATIONS was announced on the thick, glass door with NÓS FALAMOS PORTUGUÊS beneath it. It seemed that Victor's TV ads had brought at least one client; as I

entered his outer office I could hear my cousin in the back room speaking Portuguese, as the sign on his door had promised. I could only make out a couple of words clearly here and there, but I knew from the sound that he was asking questions. The man he was speaking to sounded upset. One of the words I could hear most clearly told me the questions were about his *esposa*. Chasing down cheating *esposas*, and *esposos*, was, I knew, Victor's *pão* and butter.

There was a small secretary's desk in the front room, so I sat at it and waited. In the movie that I always thought was spooling through Victor's imagination, a wealthy, seductive blonde would have walked in. In this world, no one did. Not for the half hour I sat there anyway. And the phone didn't ring. And from the thick layer of dust on the desk's green blotter, it looked as if no one had been sitting there for at least a month to answer a phone that didn't ring.

I was tempted to look in the desk drawers, for something to read if nothing else, but Victor, just like his nemesis, had a security camera mounted on the wall, so I just looked up at it every once in a while, smiled, and waved. This always brought a pause in the sound of my cousin's questioning in the inner office.

I tried to avoid looking up when he came out with his client, who scurried out of there as if he'd just left a confessional after screaming out some very embarrassing mortal sins.

"Gilbert," Victor said, turning and looking pleased and surprised to see me despite all my waving at his monitor.

He looked heavier than the last time I'd seen him, with his hair thinner and combed flat to his scalp. In his dark three-piece suit, he could easily be mistaken for a well-fed undertaker. And I didn't like his coming over to shake my hand. I was his cousin, for chrissakes.

"I just finished having a talk with Tiago D. Costa," I said.

"Oh really? What about?"

"That's what I want to know," I said. "I maybe can help you out here, Victor, but I've got to know what I'm helping you out of. You've gotta be straight with me, and none of this 'what about' crap either."

He absorbed this patiently, as if he'd expected it.

After a while, he said, "You talked to Vo, huh?"

I nodded.

He sighed, sat on the edge of the small desk, staring out at the strip mall's nearly empty parking lot. His eyes were narrowed, probably pretending he was Dirty Harry, with the "Clint squint" I used to kid him about practicing in front of a mirror.

"It was just a simple surveillance job, Gilbert," he said at last. "That's all. A woman who thought her husband was banging one of the waitresses at the Ace. Funny thing is, she was suspicious because it was a case of the dog that didn't bark. Y'know, like in Sherlock Holmes?"

I nodded, hoping to move Victor along, but he was operating on Victor time.

"Thing was," he said, smiling, "this guy had stopped coming home half in the bag. I mean, he was still going to the Ace three, four times a week, getting there about six and coming back about ten thirty, eleven, the way he always had. But he wasn't drunk any more. So that's when the wife knew there was something up. I followed him there a couple of nights. He parked in front, stayed in the place until about ten thirty, then drove home, alone and with no wobble in his steering. I was gonna give him a clean bill of health with the wife, but I needed to be sure."

"You couldn't go in there? See how he acted with the waitress?" Victor shook his head.

"Tiago D. . . . uh, he didn't want me in there. Told me it made the regulars nervous."

Ah, the downside of those ads Victor did on the local cable channel. I guess my cousin had become a little too public for a private eye.

"So, I sent in an associate," Victor said. "And he saw the husband go out the back door with the waitress about six fifteen. He followed them, got in the lot just as the waitress was driving out, with the husband in the front seat."

He went on to explain how he had his associate time their return at eight. Seems the waitress had a flexible schedule, and the Ace only really got busy after eight, which gave the husband almost two fewer hours to drink before heading home to the wife who was wondering why this dog she'd married wasn't barking anymore.

"So I thought I'd have to set up surveillance on them," Victor said at last. "And I couldn't do it in the Ace's back lot because Tiago D. has all kinds of video monitors out there."

"So you set up your own video?"

"Right. At first, I went up to Vo's apartment, but there was no looking over those big shrubs along the back fence. Then Vo said I should set up at the Bathtub Mary. I think she kind of liked the idea of using the shrine to catch the adulterers. So I gave Tiago D. Costa a taste of his own medicine. I had one of my micro-cams there—actually, the boy statue was holding it. Thought you might appreciate that."

Further proof that my cousin didn't always understand people.

"But why go to all the trouble?" I said. "Why not just follow the waitress and the cheating husband to her apartment or wherever they went for those couple of hours? Isn't that what you'd usually do?"

"I dunno," he said slowly, trying to feel his way to an alibi like a man in the dark looking for a light switch. "I had some new night equipment, wanted to try it out."

"What'd you want to get on the tape, Victor?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure you do. I'm talking about why Tiago D. would be mad enough to destroy part of Vo's shrine. It had to be a warning, and not just because you got some pictures of one of his waitresses leaving the back door with a customer. It had to be something with him."

"Well . . ." he said slowly, looking down at the floor, "I had heard that Tiago D. was waiting on a shipment, that it'd be delivered to his club."

"A shipment of what? Drugs?"

"No, some boosted electronic equipment. A lot of it."

"And this wasn't exactly coming UPS," I said.

"No, not exactly."

"And your plan was what? Try a little blackmail on him? Victor, you've got to be nuts to try to work that on a guy like Tiago."

"No, no, Gilbert," he said, waving away my argument with his chubby fingers. "I know this Fed from Boston. I'd been talking to him, told him I thought I could give him Tiago on a silver platter. And, y'know, with Tiago on the State's mobster first team, he said there might be some kind of reward involved. Though getting that bastard, Tiago D. Costa, woulda been plenty enough for me."

Ah, now it made sense. Victor had never talked about it, at least not to me, his kid cousin. But being a classmate of Tiago D. Costa, from grade one through high school, must have taken quite a toll on my chubby, camera-toting cousin.

But no blackmail? Then what the hell had Tiago been talking about?

"What went wrong?"

"I don't know, Gilbert, I just don't know. I had that mini-cam working for seven nights from ten until six in the morning, with a feed of the video into a machine up in Vo's apartment where it was saved onto eight-hour tapes. I'd go over there, have lunch with Vo and check the tapes. Nothing, nothing, nothing. Then this morning, maybe four o'clock, Vo called me, said someone had

smashed up the shrine, taken the camera. She said she thought she saw some guy with a sledgehammer leaving her yard over the back fence and going into the Ace through the back door. Then she must've called you."

"And you're sure there was nothing on the tapes."

"No, swear to God. It was the same boring thing night after night. People coming and going until closing, a few workers leaving after that, then Tiago, then nothing but a dog or a cat showing up every now and then. You know how stakeouts are, lots and lots of the same boring nothing happening. At least with these I could fast-forward."

"They all looked the same, huh?"

"Yeah, you know how it is."

I thought about it for a while before saying, "I think I do. I've got to make another visit to the perp."

Victor nodded sagely, though I'd used the word as a joke.

"Gonna go back and have a little sit-down with Tiago D.?" he asked.

"Tiago? No, Victor, not even close."

"You holding Vô's shotgun, Vo?"

She opened the door, frowning up at my caution. But I noticed that the Remington was within easy reach.

The coffee pot was just beginning to perk, so she must have seen me from her front window. I sat at her table, and she brought a plate covered with a white cloth which she whipped off like a magician, showing freshly baked raisin squares beneath.

"You sent a tape to Tiago D. Costa, didn't you, Vo?" I said, feeling so guilty to be accusing her that I ignored the raisin squares, though I knew she'd made them as a kind of payoff for me.

"Gilbert! What on earth are you talking about?" she said. Her white brows were knit with confusion, but beneath them her dark eyes gave her away. Now that I knew my guess had been right, and it was just a matter of time, I felt okay taking a raisin square.

"I think you know," I said. "It had to be you. Tiago mentioned a tape, not tapes, like he'd already seen one. Victor had no clue how Tiago found out he was being taped. In fact, all the tapes Victor saw were worthless, nothing for Tiago to get upset about. That leaves you, Vo."

"But why would I do that?" she said.

"Actually," I said around bites of juicy raisins, "that's the question I really want answered."

I probably should have also told her that Tiago was willing to

back off Victor, but that might take away what little leverage I had.

I watched my grandmother get up, walk over to the back window, and head cocked to one side, stare down toward the Bathtub Mary in the far corner of her yard, then over to the left, toward the cross on the top of Our Lady of Fatima.

"When did you get him on tape?" I said quietly.

"The second night," she whispered, her eyes fixed, her confession aimed toward her church. "It was clear as day, Gilbert, those lowlifes bringing packages into the Ace at three fifteen in the morning."

"But Victor never saw that tape."

She shook her head, but the corner of her mouth was turned up in a small, satisfied smile.

"You ran the first night's tape again and told him it was from the second night?"

He had actually given me the answer himself when he said the nothing-happening tapes had all looked the same.

"I love Victor," she said, shaking her head as she added, "but sometimes I think he's not cut out for that job. He didn't even notice the date on the tape was the same."

"You made a copy of the tape you sent Tiago D., right?"

"See?" she said, a big smile lighting her face as she turned to look at me. "Now you, *querido*, are in the right profession!"

"Where is it, Vo?"

But she was already heading for her spare bedroom. I heard her kneel down and slide out one of the storage boxes she keeps under the bed. I'd taken this morning's nap right over the damned tape she now brought out. She inserted it in her player and fast-forwarded through five hours and fifteen minutes. Then at three eighteen by the timer Victor had set, a panel truck pulled into the back lot of the Ace. Two guys in dark jackets got out as Tiago opened his back door and waited there while they carried in a dozen large cardboard containers. Then he handed one of them an envelope and they got back into their truck and drove away. Any halfway decent technician could get good blowups of the two men's faces, bring up the license plate on their truck, and help build a case for a warrant. Shouldn't be a problem with fruit of the poisoned tree, either, since the video had been taken by a private detective working on a totally separate case. But that had been a few days ago. Once Tiago D. Costa saw the tape my grandmother sent him, he sure as hell wouldn't be keeping the goods stored in the back room of the Ace.

"This tape can't prove anything now, Vo," I said. From her shrug, I realized I wasn't giving her new information.

"Will Victor be all right with Tiago D.?" she said.

"Yeah, though I should give Tiago your copy of the tape too. Tell him there aren't others. And that there won't be any others from Victor."

She nodded, ejected the tape, and handed it to me.

"I didn't want to get Victor in any trouble, Gilbert. I just . . . didn't think that far ahead."

"But why did you do it? Why send the tape to Tiago in the first place?"

It was the one thing I wanted to know, and I knew she wasn't about to answer. Her lips were a thin firm line even before she began shaking her head. No way would I want to get that lady in an interrogation room.

We had a cup of coffee together, and I had another square.

"Take the rest, Gilbert," she said, wrapping them carefully in wax paper even while I was telling her no. "Your Ashley and Jason like them, no?"

She knew Sondra didn't approve of anything that sweet for the kids. Maybe I'd just keep the squares in my car, snack my way through them in a day or two.

"And you gonna come down and see me with the family soon?" she said at the door as she put the videotapes carefully on top of the package of squares. "Bring my great-grandchildren here to see me?"

"You're not gonna make Jason dress up in that costume for the shrine, are you?"

She shook her head and laughed as she said, "You made such a handsome shepherd boy, Gilbert. There was such, I don't know, such holiness shining in your eyes. Y'know, I still got a lot of copies of that picture around. Maybe I'll send one to your family, if I don't get to see them soon."

"We'll come down this weekend, Vo. And I've got to tell you, blackmail is against the law."

"Blackmail, Gilbert? Showing my great-grandchildren a picture of their father is blackmail?"

"We'll be down, Vo. I'll call first, but, please, no pictures. Huh?"

"Okay, Gilbert," she said, rising on tiptoes to kiss me on the cheek, her small, strong fingers digging into my arms. "Thank you for squaring it about Victor and Tiago D."

I nodded and started down the stairs when it hit me. Of course, it was the same thing she'd just done to me!



Still nobody in the Ace, though it was a little after noon and they advertised a lunch special.

The tall, pale shadow came out of the back room again, but this time just waved me in there. Tiago looked as if he hadn't moved an inch since I'd last spoken to him.

"Here's the only other copy of the tape my grandmother had," I said, dropping it on his desk. "And Victor had nothing to do with sending the first one to you."

Tiago was hard to read, but he didn't seem surprised.

"It's okay, with you and Victor then, right? If there's no more taping?"


His nod was almost imperceptible, but it was there.

"One question," I said. "Just out of curiosity. What'd she want? Money for the church, for Our Lady of Fatima?"

Tiago didn't exactly smile. He was the kind of guy you probably never wanted to see smile anyway. But there was a twitch at the corners of his lips as he said, "She's a tough old woman, that grandmother of yours. Smart too."

"Didn't give you much time before she said she'd go to the cops with her copy?"

"She's a smart woman," he said again, but I already knew that anyway.

"Well, if she ever asks you to come pose for a picture at her shrine," I said as I turned to leave his office, "tell her *no*." 

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DEATH AT THE THEATRE

MARIANNE WILSKI STRONG

The winter storms had ended and two days before the beginning of the Great Dionysian Theatre Festival, Tysander, in his barbershop in the agora near the law court, was doing a brisk business.

I watched closely how his sharp razor was moving round the neck of Sophides, an old fellow whose exploits against the Persian fleet at the Eurymedon River twenty-three years ago still gave him somewhat of a hero status, at least among those like myself, who although only eight years of age at the time remembered those heady, victorious, and glorious days.

Sophides' old head bobbed up and down, but his neck remained unnicked by Tysander's razor. Tysander was in good form, having apparently, in anticipation of the day's business, stayed away from cheap wine yesterday evening at one of the preliminary celebrations of the theatre festival. I was glad to see this, as I'd on occasion received a few nicks from Tysander, especially when he got steamed over some topic like the price of eels in the agora.

"Done, Sophides," Tysander said, and looked at me. "You next, Kleides." He grinned. "I always enjoy you Sophists. Any late theories on what the earth is made of? I hear this fellow—what's his name? Anaxagoras, the one they call "Brains"—says that everything is made up of little bits of stuff: seeds or something."

"That's right, Tysander," I said. "Atoms. Even you might be made of them."

The crowd laughed heartily, except for young Euripides, who looked at me and smiled knowingly. Euripides wasn't a particular friend of mine, but I did admire him. He had courage. His plays went against standard Athenian beliefs in the gods and in

prophecies. I wondered what the subject of his play would be in the current festival. I knew that he had been chosen to compete with Sophocles and Ion of Chios. A festival with three such great playwrights, each presenting three tragedies, some of them bound to promote heated controversy, promised much excitement.

I didn't know then that the festival would incite murder, nor did I know whom it would strike.

"Well, Sophides," Tysander asked, "do you think the Persians were made of little bits?"

"They were when we got through with them." Sophides grinned a toothless grin. "Thanks to Athena. Now, may the great Poseidon of the sea rot their ships and send them all to the bottom of the Ionian Sea."

"And deprive us all of Persian beer, spices, and cloths?" a tall, thin man said. "The war ended over twenty-five years ago. Or do you think we should kill every damn Persian till not one is left?" It was Nicias, the actor. Nicias jumped up and began slashing about as if he wielded a sword. "By Zeus, once an enemy, always an enemy." He sat down, laughing loudly, his upper lip almost meeting his nose, long and sharp, rather like a weasel's.

I regarded this performance as overdone, like most of his performances. To his acting faults, I added the personal fault of insincerity when he walked over to Sophides and slapped him on the back.

"Times have changed, Sophides," Nicias said. "Even Pericles said that the Peace of Callias with the Persians meant that we no longer had to keep the oath never to rebuild the temples they burned."

Sophides brushed Nicias' hand off his shoulder as he might a troublesome gnat.

Nicias shrugged. "Look, Nike Athena gave you fellows at Marathon a victory. She was top deity then, but times have changed. Now it's Hermes' turn. That right, Kleides?"

I hated to agree with the likes of Nicias, but I admit that I did think that Hermes' attributes of compromise, persuasive talk, and even tricky bargaining were far more useful in our Athenian democracy, thriving with building projects, commerce, and marketing of goods, than the uncompromising strength and fierce sense of honor useful and necessary in a time of war. But, aloud, I reminded Nicias that Athena's wisdom was always a desirable quality.

"Look, you're a Sophist, Kleides, you and your friend Socrates. Don't you philosopher types agree that what's wise on one day might not be wise on another? We don't all admire stubborn killer

heroes like Homer's Achilles any more, do we? These days a strong voice is worth a lot more than a heavy sword. Of course, some of us have stronger voices than others. Heavy swords are Spartan trash, the tools of the dumb."

I would have had to agree again, but I noticed that three of Tysander's waiting customers were looking angry.

Sophides' eyes flared. "Those heavy swords once saved your worthless hide from Persian treachery," he said, then stomped out.

Another man mumbled something about prancing, shouting fish dealers, which I took as a metaphor for actors of whom he appeared to have a jaundiced opinion. Another, an old fellow with silver hair and a nose as majestic as the cliffs of Delphi, rose from his webbed stool, his back straight as a temple column. He cast at Nicias a look that bespoke of contempt and followed Sophides out of Tysander's shop.

Nicias began to laugh again, but Tysander, angry at having lost a customer, cut off any comments by remarking loudly that I always waited too long to get my hair cut, making his job as difficult as engaging a Spartan in conversation.

I have to admit that Tysander was right. I get involved in reading my scrolls, in arguing with Socrates, or discussing atoms with Anaxagoras and Pericles, and forget about my appearance. On the other hand, Pericles' lovely new mistress Aspasia never seems to mind, and since I am really in love with her, despite my own young mistress, Selkine, who perhaps not coincidentally resembles Aspasia, I don't worry too much.

Tysander grumbled and sheared away. I sat sheeplike answering his questions about whether or not Pericles would be at the theatre and about whether Sophocles would ever act again, now, that he'd gained such fame as a playwright. Finally, Tysander declared he'd done the best he could so that I'd look at least presentable for the theatre festival.

I paid him a full obol instead of the usual half. Tysander is a fountain of information when one needs it, and since Pericles often asks me to solve knotty crimes, I like to keep on Tysander's good side.

I left and decided to wander round the agora to see if I could get a cheap lamp, as mine was turning rather black from my burning so much olive oil well into dusk to read the latest piece of Herodotus' scrolls. His material on Egypt is fascinating. I have promised myself to hook a ride on one of my half brother's merchant ships to see the pyramids.

I passed a group of rather scruffy-looking peasants betting on a

quail-baiting game. They had drawn a circle in the dust and were about to rap the quail on the head, half of them betting that the quail would back out of the circle, the other half betting that the creature would stand its ground. I hoped the quail had enough brains to back out. It's a good strategy when your enemies are numerous and larger than you are, but I guessed that Sophides and his friend, part of the nine thousand Athenians who defeated the massive twenty thousand-man army of Persia at Marathon, would have disagreed. The quail held his ground.

I walked down the Panathenaic Way toward the Acropolis, checked out a few lamps from a dealer, then decided to walk over to the tent of Aphorus. He deals in flute girls, and one of them, a pretty girl named Phryne, had once been of some help to me in solving the murder of a lovely young woman. I wanted to see how she was.

I threaded my way past the tanners and cobblers, but before I reached Aphorus' tent, I saw some friends by the street of the blacksmiths and forgers. It was Phidias, our great sculptor; Sophocles; and Tidius, the actor who was working with Sophocles for the festival.

"By Zeus," Phidias said, "Kleides with a fresh haircut. Must be intending to worship Aphrodite tonight. Hardly recognizable, right, Sophocles?"

"Hardly, except for the glint of wisdom in the sophistic eye."

Sophocles was always as charming and kind as Phidias was satiric and irreverent.

"Looking for the lovely young Selkine?" Phidias asked. "I thought I saw her and a servant heading for the fountain house at the South Stoa. Or, let me see, was it Aspasia you were looking for?"

"But," I said, "why do you assume I was looking for either of them? Perhaps they heard about my handsome new haircut and were looking for me. Socrates and I have warned you again and again to watch your assumptions."

Phidias laughed and clapped me on the shoulder. "I assume you'll go to the theatre with Pericles and myself tomorrow. Sophocles will, of course, be driving poor Tidius mad with frantic last-minute instructions on how he wants his plays presented."

Phidias turned to Sophocles and Tidius. "Are you really going to shock us all by presenting a suicide enactment on stage?"

Tidius shook his great graying head and glared at Phidias. "I hope you aren't telling everyone about this. The audience, of course, will know the story of Ajax going mad and killing sheep he

thought were his enemies because he lost the honor to Odysseus of being declared the most valuable warrior in the Trojan War. Everyone knows the story of Ajax committing suicide over his disgrace, but how Sophocles and I will present that suicide should remain unknown until we actually perform it at the theatre."

Phidias clapped his hand over his mouth in mock horror. "May the god of theatre and wine, great Dionysus, forgive me for this trespass." He waved his hand about. "But if everyone in the agora knew exactly what you were going to do on stage, Tidius, they'd come eagerly anyway. We all remember your great performance, many years ago, in Aeschylus' play about the Persians. We'll never see its like again."

I noticed Tidius stiffen and his head pull back. I was sure that Phidias had meant to mollify Tidius, but instead he had offended the great actor. Tidius' age, I suspected, had become a sore spot. Our open-air theatres where actors had to project their voices to over fifteen thousand people required stamina and good, strong lungs.

"I count myself blessed by the gods indeed to have Tidius assigned to my play," Sophocles said. "We shall, I think, Phidias, see a performance as great as Tidius gave in *The Persians*. And now that our actors are also given prizes in competition, Tidius shall receive his just recognition."

"Persians? More talk of Persians?" Nicias came up behind Phidias and myself. He slipped between us and sidled up to Sophocles. "I do not understand this obsession some people have with our former enemies. After all, those days are over. Most of us have no further interest in the Persians or even in plays about them. The performances of old Aeschylus are gone too," he said, turning to Phidias. "We have young and imaginative playwrights like Sophocles here. With the help of young actors, Sophocles will climb to glory. I myself think it is inevitable."

Sophocles blanched.

Phidias made a choking sound. "Do pardon me," he said. "I seem to have something stuck in my throat. Perhaps a bit of bad bread oversweetened with honey."

I thought for a moment that Nicias might swing at Phidias, but the actor was too clever for that. He wouldn't want to offend either Sophocles or Pericles by attacking their friend. "Well perhaps," Nicias sneered, "the honey will help. They say it has curative powers for that which is sour."

I laid a restraining hand on Phidias' arm. "Well there you are," I said, looking Nicias in the eye, "even drones with their honey are

good for something then." I considered ducking behind Phidias then but, like the quail, decided to hold my ground. Of course, I was more broad-shouldered than Nicias, so I can't claim the honor, as the quail could, for standing up to an enemy larger than myself.

Phidias grinned at me, then announced that he had come to the agora in search of some talented artists to help with the sculpture for the Parthenon. "Since the only talents I see here," he said, "are Kleides' sophistic wisdom, Sophocles' writing, and Tidius' acting, I shall have to seek elsewhere. Unless, my dear Nicias . . ." He paused. "Unless you know some talented men among your Persian friends?"

Phidias turned and strode off.

I thought I heard Nicias mumble something about the taste of rotten eels. He turned to Sophocles. "You've been in the public eye ever since you were chosen to lead the dance of victory after we defeated the Persian navy at Salamis. You've been chosen for public offices in the democracy and are likely to be chosen for more. You know, as well as I do, the importance of forging ties to achieve victories. It is hardly a crime to see the Persians as possible allies, perhaps against Corinth. Why, we all know that one of the judges for the play and actor competitions is quite friendly with one of the Persian ambassadors."

"You indeed have more knowledge than I have," Sophocles said.

"Yes, well I believe that you know several of the judges just as I do," Nicias said, "and Kleides here knows how important knowledge is."

I considered decking the sniveling boar for his nasty implication about Sophocles. While I was debating the wisdom of that action, Nicias reached out to put an arm round my shoulder, but I side-stepped away rather neatly.

This didn't bother Nicias at all. He went on smoothly. "I would certainly like to act in one of your plays soon, Sophocles. I think we could be successful together. You know the plays of Ion, even though I am acting in one this year, are increasingly dull."

Sophocles had had enough. "I doubt that we could work together at all. Our principles are entirely different. Perhaps you might appeal to the Persians. I know that they do not practice our Greek invention of theatre, but they do have spectacles into which you might fit."

I smiled. This was very sharp talk for the normally polite and charming Sophocles. Phidias would have been pleased.

"You will pardon me now," Sophocles said to me. "Tidius and I

must go the forgers' area to secure a sword for the play."

I was still thinking about leveling Nicias for his insidious implication about Sophocles. Sophocles was thoroughly honest and his talent too great to need influence with the judges. Reluctant to risk a black eye or bruised chin, since I intended spending the night with the nubile Selkine, I settled for a comment. "Cheer up, Nicias, perhaps at the next Great Dionysian Theatre Festival you can serve as Sophocles' prop man. A man of talent like Sophocles shouldn't have to waste his time securing props."

Nicias glared. "Well, I must go now to the animal vendors in the agora to purchase a weasel. There are too many mice about in Athens, and I'd like to have the weasel get rid of a few."

I stepped up to Nicias. "Waste of a drachma for you to buy a weasel. You could just catch the mice yourself." It wasn't that clever, but I was angry.

His long, sharp nose quivered. I figured that I'd have to deal with a bruised chin after all. But I'd be able to inflict some pretty good damage myself.

Nicias stepped back. His weasel nose twitched.

I smiled.

Behind Nicias, I saw Sophides and the man who'd left Tysander's with him walk by, glaring at the two of us. I was in bad company.

"Kleides," someone to our right said. We both turned. It was my friend Phryne, the flute girl, looking rather pretty, her full breasts nicely outlined by her light white chiton, the flowing dress draped fetchingly over her body. Nicias promptly forgot about me.

"I need an escort over to Aris' villa. Accompany me, please."

"Aris?" I said. "A handsome aristocrat. You are moving up in the world, Phryne."

"Not as handsome as Alcaon, but wealthy. That'll do for now."

I took her arm. "Give Alcaon time," I said. I knew she was in love with the young man who had been the lover of the beautiful flute girl who had been murdered a year ago. We walked away, leaving Nicias staring.

"What are you doing with that weasel, Kleides?"

I laughed.

"Kleides, Nicias is unprincipled. He goes about disparaging everyone's reputation, thinking it is the way to win. Someday, somebody is going to drown him like the rat he is."

"Weasel," I said, thinking that our Greek penchant for competition in everything could be dangerous.

As we walked away, I saw Sophides and his companion still staring at Nicias' back.

The rising sun shone brilliantly on the Pentalic marble columns of the unfinished Parthenon on the second day of the Great Dionysia.

The population of Athens streamed down the Panathenaic Way, past the entrance to the Acropolis and down toward the theatre. Anticipation ran high. The statue of Dionysus, the patron god of the festival, had been brought to the theatre yesterday. Here and there in the street were discarded masks and satyr tails from yesterday's great phallic procession. Most of the young men of Athens would watch the plays today with throbbing hangovers. Phidias and I had shared two bottles of top-notch Chian wine. Even old Sophides seemed to enjoy himself, though he argued again with a drunken Nicias who gestured and sneered in his usual bragging way. Phidias and I, amused, had watched from a distance.

I walked to the theatre with my half brother, Lamicus; Phidias; Socrates; and my aging father, Almenias, who leaned heavily on my arm. Pericles had gone to the theatre before sunrise, anxious that all was well organized and that Athens would be at its best. In his youth, he had sponsored Aeschylus' play *The Persians*. I wondered if Nicias knew that.

Around us, tongues buzzed about the play Sophocles was to present today and about the young, iconoclastic Euripides, and the now conventional Ion, needing a victory to maintain his reputation. The general opinion was that the real competition would be between Sophocles and Euripides. Yesterday, the urns containing the names of the possible judges had been carried to the theatre, and ten names had been pulled out. The judges had taken the oath to judge honestly. We all knew that the wealthy producers of the plays, the choregos, tried to get friends' names put into the urns, but we also knew that after the festival a committee would meet to make sure that no impropriety had taken place. Still, I couldn't help but wonder if Nicias' cynical opportunism were not a built-in part of our democratic ways. The Spartans would say so.

We paid our two obols for a theatre token, got in line behind a group of prisoners released for the festival, attendance being a civic and religious duty, and filed into the great semicircular seating area, spreading our cloaks onto the wooden benches. Some people wrapped themselves in their cloaks, as the early morning air was still chilly. Some of the audience were already playing

games whose boards were scratched into the wood. Sounds filled the theatre: people coughing, greeting each other, laughing. Some were already arguing over the merits of the playwrights and actors. Phidias threatened that if Nicias won the acting award, he'd call for an ostracism next year. Socrates was about to launch into a discussion of what excellence really meant when the day's festivities began.

Young men carried into the theatre the tribute money from our allies, and we all cheered. Our generals, including Pericles, poured libations to the god Dionysus and drank wine in his honor. Pericles summoned in the children of Athens who had been orphaned by war and led them to seats of honor.

Once the opening festivities were over and the priests had taken their seats in the front row, the audience quieted. An occasional cough or murmur drifted over the audience to dissipate into the green cypress tree grove and the pale blue sky beyond the theatre. Behind us, the great rocky cliffs of the Acropolis rose majestically, and the red tiled roof of Pericles' Odeon, the music hall that incorporated the spars of Persian ships, stretched out to our left.

I turned to ask Socrates for a drink of his water.

"Look," breathed Phidias, "at what is on the skene. It is Sophocles' innovation."

I looked at the skene. On the wooden stage building, the skene, men had unrolled a canvas. On it was painted the scene of an army camp and behind it great towers. Already Sophocles had managed to transport us to that great walled city the warriors of the Greek army had destroyed: Troy. Sophocles intended today to stage three plays about the warriors of that great Greek army that had leveled that city.

From the middle double doorway of the skene, a group of fifteen men, dressed in long blue chitons with black stripes running from the shoulders to the hems of the flowing robes, emerged, swaying and walking slowly to the great circle below us. The chorus.

The double doorway opened again, and a figure emerged, on his mask a look of stoic concentration, his red chiton unsleeved and checked with gold at the chest, as if he wore armor. From the top of the skene, a second figure emerged, a gold chiton fluttering. It was Athena. The actor spoke, his voice booming through his mask:

You, Odysseus, you are always searching for opportunities against your enemies. Now, you look for Ajax.

The play had begun.

We watched mesmerized, all of us. Sophocles had our minds and hearts. We watched Tidius, in a black chiton, his mask a twisted face of madness and tragedy. He took us back to that long ago war at Troy, with its tragic aftermaths, and to Ajax, the great warrior, mad with dishonor, killing sheep he thought were his enemies.

As Tidius spoke, the audience leaned forward to catch the aging actor's once-great voice, a little weaker now, intoning Ajax's despair:

The years bring everything from darkness,
then send them back to darkness in the earth.

No one coughed.

We watched Ajax come to realize that all things change and pass: enemies become friends and friends become enemies. His fellow warriors had not given him honor. Even the gods had turned against him, making him mad. We watched, our eyes big, as Sophocles showed us something seldom seen on our Athenian stage, violence: Ajax committing suicide, falling on his sword before our eyes, the glory of his days gone. We watched, wondering, as Sophocles showed us Odysseus refusing to laugh at his old enemy Ajax, and giving him, like a friend, an honorable burial.

When the chorus spoke the last words of the play, "No human can know his future," we did not move. No one left to relieve themselves; no one reached for a piece of bread or fruit. We sat, pity and fear filling our hearts. We were all Ajax. None of us knew our future. None of us knew then that a murder awaited us.

As the day wore on, we put on our hats for protection against the sun, the azure sky now holding a warm spring sun, ate our honeyed bread and goat cheese, our olives and radishes, and roared at the satyr play, a drunken Heracles persuading an angry Amazon. But when the day was over, we all walked home, talking only about Ajax. Even Phidias was solemn. In front of us, Sophides walked, his head bowed in thought.

I took my father and half brother home with me, and before they fell asleep on their pallets, my father cried.

"The old days are gone," he said. "Our glorious victories against the Persians. Now we do not act as one. We argue and discuss. We disparage and mock. Then we come to a compromise."

"It is the way of democracy," I told him. "It is better than old rigid codes of honor and hatred. They were murderous."

But I don't think he was convinced.

The next day Nicias gave a surprisingly good performance in Ion's play, and the day after, Euripides shocked us all with biting irony. It was the fifth day of the festival that we learned about the murder. We had all gathered in the theatre again, most of us arguing that Sophocles would win first prize easily. He did. A thunderous cheer rose from the theatre as the ivy crown was placed on Sophocles' head. The prize ram was led out to him. We cheered too when Tidius took first prize for acting.

It was only when the second prize for acting was announced that we all realized that Nicias was not in the theatre to receive his reward.

The judges consulted with each other; the priests looked annoyed.

"Well, he was here late last night," Phidias said.

"You saw him?" I asked. "Where? And when?"

Phidias nodded. "I was out very late. I've already studied the effects of the sun on the angles of the new pediments on the Parthenon, so I wanted to see exactly how the moonlight would touch the front pediment. I saw Nicias going into the theatre."

"Alone?"

Phidias looked back at the center circle of the theatre where the playwrights, judges, and actors were standing. He shrugged. "Alone? Who's to say if he was or wasn't? What I can say is that I saw Nicias going into the theatre."

Phidias was no sophist or politician. He was an artist. His attempt at dissembling was weak. I knew he was lying.

The awarding of the prizes went on, but I was not surprised to see Pericles send two men into the skene. Nor was I surprised when, sometime later, one of the men made his way up the wooden seats and whispered to me that when the ceremony was over Pericles wanted to talk with me.

I waited until most of the audience had filed out of the theatre, some talking of Sophocles' victory, some of the criticism of the old warrior code in his play, and some of Nicias' absence. Not a few people kept on eye on me as I made my way toward the skene. Some of them knew that I was in Pericles' small circle of trusted friends and that I had previously helped with some homicides.

Inside the skene, Pericles and two of the city magistrates who had charge of organizing this year's festival of Dionysus stood talking quietly.

"Kleides," Pericles said as I approached, "Nicias has been mur-

dered. I need your help. You must discover who did this. It is imperative."

I frowned. "Of course, I'll do what I can. But what is the urgency? When and if the perpetrator is known, Nicias' relatives can bring the charges to the homicide court." That was our Athenian procedure. Pericles usually asked me to investigate only if the murder posed some danger to the democracy. Aspasia, of course, once asked me to solve a murder because of danger to Pericles himself.

Pericles turned to the magistrates. "Perhaps you would go out and relieve the Scythians who are guarding the body at the foot of the Acropolis. I will explain to Kleides what we have found and then send him out to see."

The magistrates looked at each other, apparently as puzzled by Pericles' actions as I was. But they obeyed, and left by one of the side entrances.

Pericles held his chin in his hand and looked as thoughtful as he did when he was about to address our assembly to persuade them to vote for a policy he favored. He usually got his way. We all knew that much of the glory of our city was due to his wisdom in making Athens a place where art, philosophy, and literature thrived.

I waited. He seemed to be struggling with a decision.

Finally he looked at me directly, his dark, intelligent eyes brooding beneath his high, broad forehead. "I do not hesitate because I do not trust you with this information, Kleides. I know your discretion and your fairness. I hesitate because what I need to tell you is not easy for me to say."

This was most unusual. Pericles was known as "The Olympian," not only for his intelligence and his aloofness from the more garrulous and dionysiac social life of the city, but for his ease and beauty of expression. I waited.

"Kleides, last night Sophocles spent part of the evening with Aspasia and myself. An hour or two after dusk, he said that he wanted to go to the theatre for some scrolls he had left at the skene. He came to and left from my house by himself."

"So," I said, "he has no witnesses to swear to where he was last night or when. I take it that Nicias was killed here in the theatre."

"Indeed, he was." Pericles pointed to a dark stain on the floor. It looked newer than the other myriad stains from paint, slain animals, the gods only knew what. The new stain spread toward one of the side entrances as if what or whoever had bled had been pulled along toward the door.

"Were more people than you and Aspasia at your house to hear Sophocles announce that he was coming to the theatre?" I asked.

"Yes. One or two of those people are not known for holding their tongues in check. So this murder must be solved."

I nodded. "And were there some at your house who would bite their tongues rather than implicate Sophocles?"

Pericles raised his thick eyebrows.

"Phidias," I said. "He let slip that he was out late last night and saw Nicias going to the theatre. He dissembled when I asked if he saw only Nicias. It was quite easy to see that he was protecting someone."

Pericles shook his head. "Phidias is a supreme artist. But his mastery of clever rhetoric is, ah, incomplete, let us say. But Sophocles must be innocent. By all the gods on Olympus, what reason would he have for killing Nicias?"

"I'm afraid there might be one. Nicias' relatives, at least, might well devise one if they hear gossip. Yesterday in the agora, Nicias implied that Sophocles might try to influence some of the judges. Nicias took no pains to speak low. He could easily have been overheard. If he were, well then word will fly round Athens in very little time."

Pericles pushed back on his head the helmet he wore in public, releasing some graying curls round his temples. He was aging. I wondered if Athens' great glory could survive without him. "Nicias' charges are absurd," he said. "Sophocles' genius is quite sufficient to capture first prize."

"Of course," I said. "He is most likely innocent. It would take much provocation to bring him to brutal violence."

Pericles smiled. "Ever the Sophist, Kleides. You will not concede that one of such beauty, honesty, and charm as Sophocles could not kill."

"Beauty, honesty, and charm are indeed his virtues, as is great intelligence and talent. But these do not constitute the whole of human nature for any man."

"Well, I persist in believing in Sophocles' innocence. But I am happy to have your open and inquiring mind to which I can trust this matter. Go out, Kleides, to where Nicias' body lies and put that mind to work."

I made my way out of the skene, went down the steps of the stone retaining wall, across the drainage channel, and behind the theatre to the rocky foundation of the Acropolis. As I approached, one of the magistrates tossed his head, indicating something behind him. I noticed that his olive complexion looked particu-

larly green. I walked behind the greenish magistrate and looked down. I may have turned a little green myself. I swallowed, willing the barley porridge I'd eaten this morning to stay down where it belonged.

I turned back to the magistrates and told them to return inside and have Pericles send the Scythian police back to collect the body.

The magistrates left with, I thought, a look of gratitude on their faces.

I took a moment or two to make sure that the porridge remained below, then turned back to Nicias' body. He'd been stabbed. In the bowels. The blood had flowed freely and caked in dark brown streaks down to his knees. His eyes were open and his features distorted into a grimace.

He had met a painful and violent end.

I swallowed again and knelt for a better look at the wound. It was too large to have been made with a knife. Someone had thrust a sword into him.

I rose and looked around. But there were no footprints. The terrain here was too rocky to have taken any.

I looked at Nicias again and noted that a gold ring still encircled a finger on his left hand. No thief had done the deed. I hadn't thought so anyway. A thief would have struck from the back. A clean blow to the head. This crime spoke of rage.

I directed the Scythians to wrap the body and take it to the prison house near the South Stoa until Pericles could send someone to notify the dead man's relatives.

I left the area, circling round to the hill of the Pnyx. No one would be at our assembly site. The democracy had no meetings set for today. The festival was not officially over until the end of the day. Most Athenians would be celebrating in the agora, at local taverns, or at their own homes. I would be left alone to think.

Like Pericles, I did not wish to think Sophocles guilty of homicide. But like Socrates, I knew that human nature was possessed complete by all men, with all its virtues and evils. I knew, too, that popular opinion that good resided in the fair and evil in the ugly, was wrong. The surface did not necessarily reflect the interior.

Thus I steeled myself for questioning Sophocles. I would have to reveal honestly to Pericles whether his answers tended to his guilt or innocence.

I returned to the theatre, and in inquiring of those who remained milling about, discovered that Sophocles had declared

his intention of returning to his home to prepare for an evening's celebration to which I was, of course, invited.

I dug in the hem of my cloak and found an obol to pay a disheveled water boy to go to Sophocles' home and request that he meet me back at the theatre on an urgent matter.

I returned to the skene, not wanting to leave the place where I believed a key piece of evidence might still lay.

I looked around for the sword upon which Ajax, in the person of Tidius, had fallen. It was, I suspected, the sword that had killed Nicias. It would have hung upon the wooden wall of the skene, where the props were kept for ease of access during performances. It could conveniently and easily have served another function: murder.

I didn't see the sword. The murderer would have taken it away, stained with blood as it no doubt was.

I thought of all who had a grievance against Nicias and would have easy access: Sophocles, of course; Phidias; Tidiias; anyone else who had business at the theatre, including Euripides and Ion of Chios; all the other actors and members of the choruses. For that matter, I thought, if the skene had not been padlocked, anyone offended by Nicias could have entered to take and return the sword. I found myself relieved and glad to have suspects other than Sophocles. This, for a Sophist, would not do. I had to bring my emotions into check.

I heard the wooden door open and turned to see Sophocles outlined against the bright air outside.

He blinked. "Kleides?" he said, glancing round.

I stepped away from the wall where I had just tried to open a firmly latched chest. "I'm over here, Sophocles. Thank you for coming so promptly."

"The messenger boy said it was urgent."

"Indeed, it is. Have you not wondered where Nicias was for the ceremonies this morning?"

"I did, Kleides. I fear he may be gravely offended by his second place, though surely all recognize that Tidius deserved the first prize." Sophocles moved into the skene, still blinking to adjust his eyes. "Have you news of him?"

I moved toward him, taking a deep breath. In the light that came through the open door, I saw that the forehead of his handsome face was furrowed in genuine or pretended concern. His brown beard, a little longer than Pericles', was as well groomed as the curved eyebrows above his large, wide-spaced eyes. Not one's idea of a murderer.

"Nicias has much to be offended at," I said. "He has been murdered. Probably here at the theatre."

Sophocles did not move. He stared at me. "Kleides," he said finally, "surely you are . . . but no, how could you be mistaken about such a thing." He shook his head. "How? Who?"

"And why?" I said. "Pericles has asked me to inquire into the matter."

"Of course. You are best at such work. But why did you send for . . ." He paused again. "Oh, yes. Of course." He nodded, his quick intelligence understanding. "I did announce last night that I was coming over to the theatre for some scrolls. In fact, Nicias had sent a message that he wanted to meet me here. And so he did. But when I left him, he was most alive. Angry, but alive."

"What did he want?"

"He urged me to select him as my main actor for next year's Great Dionysia."

"Well, I know . . ."

Sophocles held up his hand, stopping me. "More than that, Kleides. He threatened that if I did not announce the choice soon, he would spread the rumor that I had influenced the judges this year, worked to get those I knew on the selection lists."

I nodded. "You didn't, of course."

"A statement, Kleides, or a question?"

I smiled. "I am a Sophist, Sophocles. I distinguish between what I know and what I believe. I know that you influenced the judges by the brilliance of your plays. But I don't know that you didn't use other influences, though I believe that you did not."

"I did not, Kleides."

"What did you say to Nicias?"

"Very little. I laughed and told him to lock the skene when he left. He is an actor. He has a key. Then I left."

"Leaving him behind, angry but alive?"

"Yes. I swear. That is true. But then, you Sophists, above all, know that language can be used in the service of truth or lie."

"Yes. As a sword might be used to imitate a death, as in your play, or to truly kill someone."

"By all the gods, Kleides. Are you saying that the sword I used in the play was the murder weapon?"

"Perhaps. It is not here now."

"But who has taken it?" He held up his hand again. "A stupid question. The murderer, of course. But you are sure it is gone?"

I gestured at the walls. "Wouldn't it be hanging on the wall?"

"Normally," Sophocles said, "while we are rehearsing. But once

the festival is over, we put the props in a chest and retrieve them when we have opportunity." He moved to the left side of the skene, bent over, and yanked open a chest. He pulled out a sword and turned to me.

I am ashamed to say that, for a moment, I measured the distance to the open door, wondering how fast I could run out and up the wooden seats to safety.

Sophocles held the sword out to me.

I took it. "I need to see it in the light," I said, moving toward the open door, Sophocles following.

I stepped out and onto the little slope that led to the great circle of the theatre. I lifted the sword and examined it in the sunlight. I could find no stain upon it. It would have been wiped clean by the murderer, but blood tended to leave traces on metal no matter how vigorous the rubbing. I turned to Sophocles and showed him the sword. "No blood. This was not the murder instrument." I felt immensely relieved. It was unlikely that Sophocles had come to the theatre last night armed against Nicias. He would have had no knowledge of what Nicias wanted. Unless Nicias had said so in his message.

"Sophocles," I asked, "was anyone else at the theatre last night?"

"No," he said. "I saw no one. Only . . ." He stopped.

"Who? You must tell me."

"I saw friends. But they were not in the theatre. They stopped me nearby to tell me that Nicias had on the evening of the procession bragged that he would act in my plays next year and that we would win, guaranteed."

"Who?" I asked again, already knowing who might have warned Sophocles of the slanderous tongue of Nicias.

But Sophocles did not answer at first. "Sophides," he said finally. He was staring at the sword.

"Let me see it," he said.

I took a deep breath, assured myself that I could run faster than Sophocles, as I did at the gymnasium, and handed him the sword.

He ran his hand over the handle. "I just noticed. This isn't the sword I bought at the forger's shop for the play. The one I bought had rings of gold down the entire handle. I wanted the gold to gleam in the suicide scene. This handle has the rings only partway down and they are not gold. It was made by the same forger. You see his mark here, and it is close to the one I bought, but not exactly. I never noticed during the performance, so commanding was Tidius."

I thought carefully about the suicide scene I had watched. I

had seen no gleam of gold from the sword handle. I knew then who had murdered Nicias. Had it been Sophocles, he would not have told me that this sword was not the one he had purchased for the play.

Sophocles was staring at the sword again. "By Hades," he said, "I had not thought, but . . . but I must go to him."

"He is not at your house?"

"No. I must find him."

"No. Go home, Sophocles. Let me do my work."

I turned and hurried out of the skene, leaving by the front double door. I glanced back as I exited. Sophocles had his head in his hands.

I wasn't sure exactly where to head, so I paused a moment to think. Something caught my eye, and I raised my head. Gold. Rings of gold.

Tidius rose, sword in hand, from the first of the wooden tiers. He stepped down and walked across the circle of the theatre toward me. He stopped in the middle.

"Sophocles is not to blame," he said.

"I know." I considered backing up, but stood my ground.

"I was on my way to Sophocles' house. I heard that you asked him to meet you here. I knew why. It was quite obvious."

The whole matter was becoming obvious. "You were here last night too, weren't you? You heard Nicias' threats to blacken Sophocles' reputation. But then you must also have heard Sophocles dismiss the threats with a laugh. So your motive was not to protect Sophocles."

Tidius shook his great head, the one that had worn the mask of tragedy for so long. "Partly, perhaps, but in truth, I killed him because he laughed at me, as Ajax's enemies laughed at him. My voice is weakening, as is my strength. Neither will last much longer. My day is over, as was Ajax's. When Sophocles left, I berated Nicias for his evil. He brushed me aside, called me 'a dried leaf.' I crumpled against the wall and my hand found the sword. I struck him in rage. I had come to the theatre to relive the glory of this great festival." His voice cracked. "I ended up killing a man." He shook his great head again.

I began to move forward, knowing what was coming.

"Stop," he called out, his actor's voice loud and sure again.

I stopped.

He raised the sword and pointed it downward toward his gut. "I stopped him. But I cannot stop time."

"No, Tidius, no!" Sophocles came running out of the skene.

"My day is over. Better to end in triumph." His voice rasped over the last three words.

The sword rose higher, catching the sun on its gold rings.

Tidius plunged it into himself. He stood for a moment, like a magnificent warrior of old, then tumbled down the wooden stairs.

I did not go to Selkine that night. I stayed with my ailing old father. He listened with sadness as I explained why Tidius had done what he had done.

"He'd taken the sword with which he'd killed Nicias," I said. "After he killed Nicias, he went to the forger's early in the morning and bought another, as close to the original as he could to replace the one he had taken. I knew when Sophocles told me that the sword in the theatre was not the original that the murderer had to have been Tidius. He was the only one besides Sophocles and the forger himself who knew exactly what the original one looked like, who would know that the forger had made the original sword."

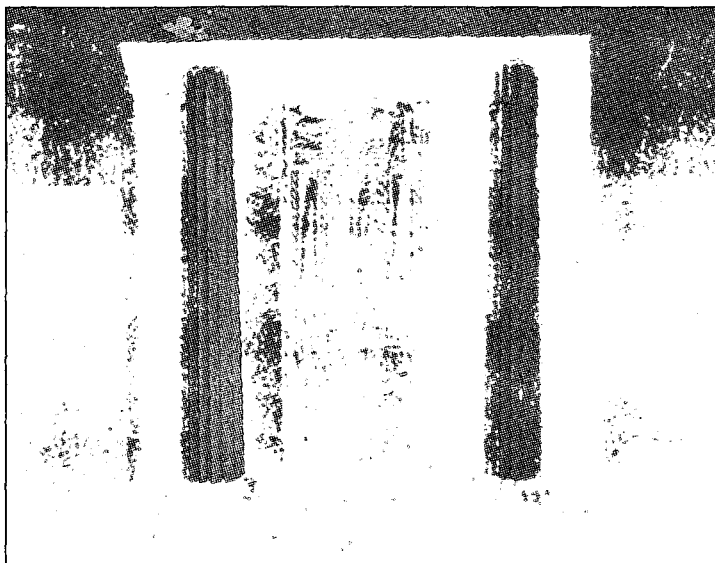
My father stared into the smoke that rose from the terracotta lamps. He pulled his chiton closer round his stooped shoulders. "A great actor," he said. "He had played the defeated Xerxes in Aeschylus' great play *The Persians* with such dignity and compassion that we who saw the performance could almost feel sorrow for our defeated enemy. But all that is past," he said, rising to go up to his bed.

I watched him climb the stairs slowly, the olive oil burning in the lamp, leaving its pungent odor and smoke lingering on the stair.

I sighed and reached for the scroll of Herodotus' history of the Persian War. I had been a child then and was a young man now in our democracy. The old warrior glory had indeed passed. I wondered if under Pericles' guiding hand Athens would rise to such heights that her glory would never pass from men's minds.

I was young enough to hope so. ♀

MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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Not a Creature Was Stirring

We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "January/February Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the July/August Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 237.

SIMON AND DOROTHEA

ELEANOR BOYLAN

The elegant museum in Sarasota glittered with Christmas lights, but in one of the galleries, something different glittered . . .

“**L**adies and gentlemen,” said Simon Judson, his mind a million miles away, “the museum will close in fifteen minutes. This is the last room on your tour. As you leave, kindly take the stairs in the hall, which lead to the parking lot. Now,” he dragged his mind back to the job, “if you will observe the painting on the wall behind me . . .”

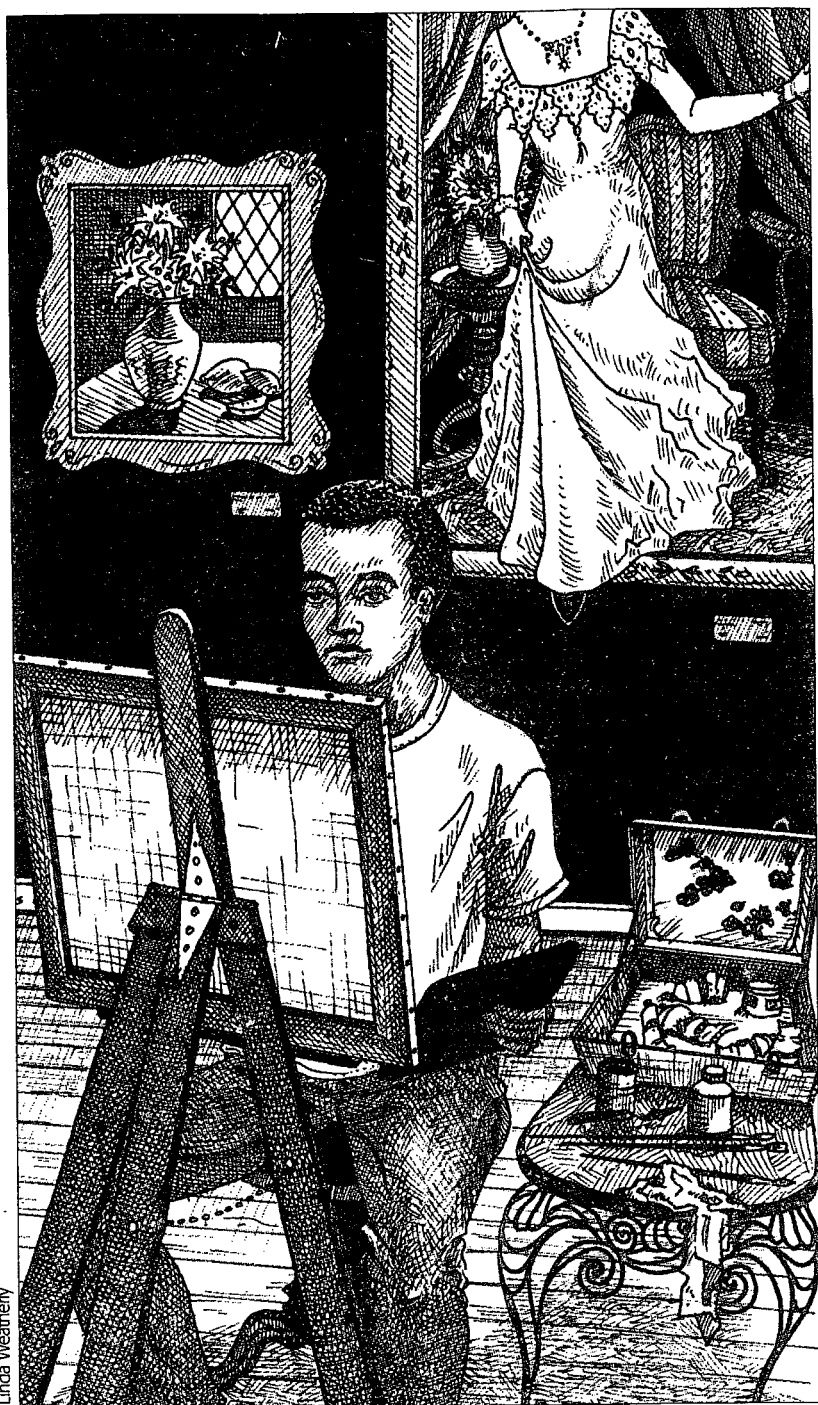
Simon went on, looking unseeingly at the faces in the group before him. He was thinking that seven o'clock would be too early. There were bright gleams in the Florida night sky at that hour, and the area blazed with Christmas lights. If he was even seen on the museum grounds after hours it would be all over before it began. He could hear his boss saying, “That’s what I get for hiring a black kid.”

He continued, glancing back at the painting, “This is the portrait in oils of Dorothea Fox-Nugent, founder of the museum. It was commissioned by her husband, a wealthy businessman, for the opening of the museum in 1935. That opening, which was held on Mrs. Fox-Nugent’s fortieth birthday, was the event of the year in Sarasota and was attended by this city’s most distinguished society.”

Even eight o'clock would be risky, he thought, and if there was a moon . . . He went on, “Mrs. Fox-Nugent is wearing a sky blue satin evening gown designed for her in Paris especially for the occasion.” Here Simon smiled a little, as he had learned to do. “Some members of proper Sarasota society of that day considered the gown a bit daring and décolleté.”

A little girl in the group said, “What’s decol—decol—what?” and everybody laughed.

Simon smiled at her. “It means very low cut. However, Mrs. Fox-



Nugent was noted for her daring—and for her diamonds. Observe that she is wearing a tiara, rings, necklace, and earrings of these jewels. She was considered striking rather than beautiful, with dark brown hair and a diminutive figure."

"What's dimin—" the little girl started to say, but her mother shushed her.

"Very small," said Simon patiently. He was thinking that "very small" might also describe his chance of getting away with tonight's crazy plan. Glancing at his watch, he continued, "The museum is a replica of a sixteenth century French château. It was built here in Sarasota by the Fox-Nugents not only as their home, but also to house the splendid collection of paintings and sculptures acquired during many years of travel. Upon opening it to the public, the Fox-Nugents moved their living quarters to the spacious top floor of the château. After her husband's death, Mrs. Fox-Nugent continued to expand the collection until her own death in 1960. With its fine view of the Gulf of Mexico, this small but elegant museum is one of Sarasota's most popular attractions."

A man in the group asked, "Is it owned by the city?"

"Excuse me?" Simon's thoughts had begun to wander again. Suppose somebody saw the stuff in his locker . . .

"I said, does the city of Sarasota own this place?"

"No. The Dorothea Fox-Nugent Museum is privately owned and operated by a board of trustees." He moved forward. "Please take a few minutes to look around this room, which holds the finest paintings of the collection. On the right wall you see a Copley, a Sargent, and a Tintoretto. On the left wall, a Hals and a Veronese. On the rear wall," he knew his voice changed as he got to the rear wall, "is an early Van Zellér, one of his most beautiful Nativities. It depicts Mary, Joseph, and the child Jesus in a raised structure resembling a dovecote."

Simon was always annoyed by the people in these groups who, instead of turning to look at the works of the masters, continued to gawk at the portrait of Mrs. Fox-Nugent. When they raved about it he always wanted to say, "It's nothing but a second-rate pretty picture and it doesn't belong in here." In a way, though, it did. Her museum had been a wonderful gift to the city, and the lady probably deserved to be surrounded by her best treasures. But in Simon's estimation, the portrait was flashy and too flattering. He'd seen photographs of Dorothea Fox-Nugent and learned a lot about her during his training course. He respected what she'd done for Sarasota, but he thought she looked rather bossy and stuck up.

He said, "Are there any questions?"

Staring at him, a fat woman asked, "How old are you?"

Simon wanted to say, "I didn't mean personal questions," but he smiled politely.

"Twenty."

The little girl asked, "What's your name?"

"Simon."

Now everybody was staring at him. He was used to it. He knew he looked great in the red museum blazer, and as the only black tour guide he'd be bound to attract attention.

An elderly man asked, "Are you a student?" to which Simon nodded. "Where?"

"The Ringling School of Art."

The man smiled. "You're very well versed in your subject, young man. You give a good tour."

"Thank you." The closing bell rang shrilly. "And thank you all for coming. Let me remind you that the museum is not open on Christmas Day."

There was a patter of applause and the room began to empty. Simon waited until the last person had cleared the door then snapped off the lights. Through the dimness he could still see the gleam of Mary's halo in the Nativity. He smiled at it thinking, Just a few more hours and you'll be mine, all mine!

He hurried down the hall to a door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY. The room was bare except for some lockers and a few chairs. He hung up his blazer and tie, took off his white shirt, and pulled on a T-shirt. Then he got out of his trousers and into jeans. Standing before his locker mirror, he was smoothing his hair when a middle-aged fellow guide came in. Simon closed the locker door quickly and said, "Hi, Bill."

"Big Saturday night date, Si?"

"Just Volanda." He hated having to sound casual about Volanda because he liked her so much, but everything he said tonight had to sound casual. He turned the key in his locker and went out, telling Bill to have a nice weekend. He was fighting panic. If anything went wrong he'd lose his job, maybe go to jail, and his mother and Aunt Hannah and everybody he knew would be shocked and disappointed—everybody but Volanda. She'd suggested it and said it should work.

Bolstering his courage with that thought, Simon walked down the hall, passing other guides coming off duty. Their pleasant "good nights" made him feel horribly guilty; he was the youngest of them all and knew he was something of a favorite. Stairs took him to a door that opened onto the beautiful garden of the museum. The

winter was unusually warm, and the place was a riot of flowers under bordering palm trees. Visitors were still straggling down the gravel path toward the big iron gate that formed one of the two entrances. The grounds were surrounded by a ten-foot-high red brick wall, and Simon had decided that this back gate would be better than the one to the parking lot, which was visible from the street.

Mr. Fitz, the head gardener, herded out the last of the visitors and started to close the gate, looking over his shoulder.

"Last call. You going out this way, Si?"

"No, I was just, er, thinking how pretty the garden looks."

"I never thought you were much for gardens. You're usually roaring off on that motorcycle of yours."

"It's in the shop," Simon lied. "I gotta hike to the bus stop."

"I'm out of here in five minutes." Mr. Fitz pocketed his keys. "Give you a lift?"

"Oh—no thanks." Simon backed hastily inside. "Come to think of it, a friend said he might pick me up."

He joined the parade of employees moving toward the door to the parking lot. A beverage machine stood there and Simon got himself a soda. Then he walked across the lot and halfway down the drive. He sat on a stone bench and opened his soda. Trapped without his bike, he waved at the stream of departing cars, declined offers of lifts in favor of the non-existent friend who was picking him up, and glanced often at his watch with what he hoped looked like a "waiting" frown.

Now the parking lot was deserted except for the night watchman's car. This week it was Mr. O'Malley, and right now he'd be having his supper in the little sitting room behind the office where the rather antiquated alarm system was. The museum had never had a break-in. Simon had learned in casual conversation with Mr. O'Malley that the watchman's rounds were every three hours beginning at eight o'clock. Plenty of time if all went well. Simon had told his mother that he and Volanda were going to a movie so she wouldn't expect him; she was the kind of mom who tended to "expect" you even though you were twenty.

He stuffed the soda can in a receptacle and went down the drive to Sun Circle with its pretty walk curving along the gulf, then up Sapphire Drive to the bus stop and the sign that read DOROTHEA FOX-NUGENT MUSEUM with an arrow. There were nice homes along here and some traffic now, but it would taper off later. Simon knew this because he and Volanda had walked around the area last night. He supposed he should eat something, but he doubted if he could swallow a crumb. Maybe a candy bar

would go down. He strolled another block to a Quickmart and bought one. Then he crossed Route 41 and went into the crowded lobby of the Days Inn. He sat down in a corner with a magazine in front of his face and stared at it. And stared at it for what seemed like an eternity.

At eight thirty it was dark, at least as dark as it was going to be with that gorgeous big old moon hanging up there. Simon recrossed Route 41, walked back along the now quiet Sapphire Drive, and stood at the foot of the museum driveway. The château was on a rise and he looked up with a funny chill at its silhouette towering behind the wall. The wall itself cast a deep shadow, but the slope up to that protecting darkness was silvery bright. He figured it would take him ten or eleven seconds to sprint up, and if he was seen that was the end of him.

Simon took a deep breath and dashed. He reached the wall and leaned against it gasping for breath, looking and listening. Not a sound. Not a soul.

Simon strained his eyes through the darkness. Now he was glad for that moon. He needed to locate the head of the figure of Neptune with its spiky crown that would be his guide to the gate; it was about forty feet away around a bend in the wall, rearing up blackly in the moonlight.

Simon grinned to himself as he crept along in the shadows. He was thinking of the many times he'd stood in the garden and droned, "This fourteen-foot iron sculpture of the god of the sea was acquired by Dorothea Fox-Nugent on a trip to Italy in 1920. She had it shipped to Florida and placed at this gate, appropriately in view of the blue waters of the Gulf of Mexico." Thanks, Dorothea, he thought. It's a great guide. The gate was a cinch to climb, and he dropped into the sweet-smelling garden.

The door he wanted was at the foot of a loading ramp at the rear of the château. Simon ran across the garden, leaping flower beds and feeling in his pocket for the key. It better fit. The locksmith had called the original an "old timer" and said he hadn't seen one like it in years. Simon had told him it came from his grandmother's attic in Georgia. He walked down the ramp and put the key in the lock. It turned.

He stood for a few seconds, telling himself to calm down or take it easy or whatever you're supposed to do when your heart is racing. Then he opened the door and beamed his pocket flashlight around the pitch-dark storeroom. There was an elevator on one side and cement stairs on the other. He started up the stairs, his sneakers

seeming to squeak loudly in the utter stillness, and went through the door to the main hall of the museum.

Moonlight streaming through the casement windows made all the familiar furniture and tapestries look ghostly and different. Simon stood still, listening. Faintly, from across the great hall and down a corridor, came the sound of Mr. O'Malley's TV. Simon looked around, feeling like the intruder he knew he was. He shouldn't be here alone. He should be saying to fifteen or twenty people, "This was the grand hall of the château, where families gathered and from where they mounted the stone staircase on your right to the bedchambers above. Mrs. Fox-Nugent had those rooms designated as galleries. Now, if you will follow me . . ."

He roused himself. The heck with "follow me." There was no one to follow him as he took the stone steps two at a time. He didn't need his flashlight here, he knew every inch of the hall, and he waved to the paintings and patted the marble behind of a Venus as he ran by. Now he turned a corner and reached a door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY. It took only a minute to get the gear from his locker, then he was back down the hall to Her Place, as the staff called the room where Dorothea Fox-Nugent's portrait hung. He beamed his light around the room and almost laughed out loud. He'd made it!

Quickly, Simon moved to the one big window across which heavy velvet draperies were always drawn to keep out the damaging sun. He made sure there wasn't a chink, then reached for the wall switch. The room lit up and he drew a deep breath of satisfaction and got to work.

First he unfolded his easel and set it before the Van Zeller Nativity, then unrolled a canvas and thumbtacked it to its wooden frame. Next he pulled forward a wrought-iron table from which he lifted a porcelain shepherdess—careful here, it was immensely valuable—and set it on the floor at a safe distance. A Florentine stool proved just the right height, and Simon opened his paints and sat down. He was alone with one of the most beautiful paintings in the world and about to make the best copy of it ever. He scanned his canvas—the light wasn't great—and found the pencil sketch he'd made. Then he looked over his shoulder at the portrait of Dorothea, blew it a kiss, and said aloud, "I know you don't approve of liquid paints in the galleries, honey, but please don't snitch, and Merry Christmas." He began to mix his paints.

"Snitch? I shall have you arrested."

Simon sat still, petrified. He forced himself to look around the room at the empty shadows and the dark of the door. No one.

Then a rustling sound from the portrait drew his eyes. Dorothea was stepping out of the frame, satin dress shimmering, diamonds sparkling as she descended to the floor, leaving a faded image on the canvas behind her. She was surrounded by an odd, pale light.

Dazed, Simon heard himself say, "A ghost. A real see-through ghost . . ."

"You aren't afraid?"

Sure he was terrified, but he tried to shore up his courage with a little joke. "I guess . . . better a ghost than the guard." Not funny. He could only swallow and keep staring.

Dorothea drifted nearer. "You realize that I could touch the alarm and the police would be here in three minutes."

This made him say, "Well, not really three, and I could be out of here in two. I know the joint. I work here."

She swirled back from him, her eyes flashing almost like her jewels. "Don't you know enough to stand up when a lady comes in the room?"

Shakily, Simon stood up. "I guess the way you came in was so weird I forgot to." He faced her, slowly beginning to realize that he had nothing to fear from this spook except the possibility of being thrown out. She returned his look with an icy stare and said, "I once had a little stableboy who was a Negro."

"Figures."

"He was also a thief."

Simon shrugged. "Maybe he thought that if he belonged to you, then what you had belonged to him."

"He didn't belong to me!" The light around her flared. "He was a servant, not a slave. Good heavens, how old do you think I am?"

Simon said in his tour guide voice, "She was born in 1895 in New York City of Irish immigrant parents. Self trained, she became secretary to the millionaire banker Everett Fox-Nugent and married his son, Everett Jr., in 1915, et cetera, et cetera. I probably know everything about you there is to know." He looked longingly at his easel.

"Then you know that I left strict provisions in my will regarding this museum. Visitors may be allowed to dry sketch but no liquid paints are permitted in any of the galleries." She pointed indignantly at his paints, then gasped. "The shepherdess! Where is it? That is one of the most valuable—"

"—items in the collection." Simon was getting impatient. "Executed in 1710 by Henri Duvivier, *blah, blah, blah*, and there it is safe and sound. Look, lady, I'm not hurting anything, so just listen to me for a minute, will you?"

She glared at him but was silent. Simon went on in the most polite voice he could muster. "My name is Simon Judson and I'm an artist; that is, I want to be one. I took a job here as a tour guide because I love this stuff. I go to the Ringling School of Art and our assignment over the Christmas vacation is to make a copy of a famous Nativity. That Van Zeller," his eyes went to it lovingly, "is one of my favorite paintings."

"There are postcards of it in the gift shop."

"I don't want to copy any dumb postcard!" He bit his lip, not wanting to sound rude. "I want to sit here with it, just Van Zeller and me."

"Oh, you are to be given special privileges, are you?" she said sarcastically. "You are to be allowed to splash your paints—"

"I'm not splashing!" Simon was getting mad. "I'm being real careful and I only have three nights. The day after Christmas they're starting to make more storage space in the basement and the door I stole a key to will be boarded up so when . . ."

"You stole a key?"

Oops—wrong word. "I mean, I borrowed it to have a copy made. I'm not a thief like that poor little stableboy of yours." He couldn't help adding, "And I'll bet he was just taking some food home to his family."

"On the contrary, he stole something very precious to me."

"Then you should be glad all I want to do is paint." Simon was beginning to feel desperate. "Please let me stay—please, lady!"

"Stop calling me *lady*. It's ignorant. My name is Mrs. Fox-Nugent."

Simon grinned at her. "Your name is Dorothea. One heck of a pretty name, I must admit."

She stood still and her milky face under all that dark hair changed slightly. Had he gotten to her with his little compliment? She said, looking at his paints, "Certainly this idea of yours is ingenious."

"It was my girl's idea." Simon took this as the go-ahead and sat down, picking up his brush. "She's the ingenious one."

"Also the mistaken one." Dorothea's surrounding light flared. "The rules of this museum must not be violated."

"Who's violating? I just wanted—"

"I don't know who you think you are, other than a common housebreaker, but you will leave this museum immediately."

Simon sat seething, then he stood up and said, "I'll tell you who I think I am. I'm an unlucky guy who had a good thing going till you came along and blew it." He collapsed his easel with an angry

snap. "How the heck did you swing this, anyway? I thought people died and stayed dead."

"There are certain outrages," she was moving along the wall looking at the painting, "that one may be allowed to return and rectify."

"Well, consider yourself rectified." Frustrated and angry, Simon began setting the room to rights. "You can go back to your heavenly rest and feel good. Maybe I'll get a job at Burger King. They might even let me come back after hours and paint the Whoppers—or would that be violating the place?" He walked to the door. "So long, Dorothea, and thanks for nothing."

But she was gone. Simon shrugged and went back down the hall to his locker. He stashed his gear, then retraced his steps to the basement. As he beamed his light on the door, Dorothea's voice said, "I am dismayed."

It made him jump. She was hovering near the elevator.

He said, "Will you kindly stop following me? I said I was going, didn't I?"

"Dismayed!"

"Why?"

"The security here is deplorable. If you were able—"

"Relax." Simon opened the door. "With a gimmick like you, who needs security?"

He turned the key behind him and walked up the ramp. What a rotten break. He stood for a minute letting the breeze from the gulf cool his hot face. What the heck had really happened? He knew guys who took stuff they said gave them crazy dreams. What had he taken? A soda and a candy bar. Dorothea had seemed real enough in there; out here she was nothing and nowhere. He was tired, that had to be it. He'd been concentrating on this crazy plan and blown his brains.

Simon got over the fence and back to the street. Funny. He'd been so scared and careful going in, now he didn't give a darn what happened. He never wanted to go back to the place. He'd phone in tomorrow and say he was quitting.

Trudging back to the bus stop, Simon desperately wished he had his motorbike. He'd known he couldn't bring it today and he'd left it at Volanda's house.

Volanda. His heart sank. How was he going to tell her about this nutty Dorothea business? He couldn't. She'd think he was bats and maybe he was. What made it worse was that the idea of going

in there to paint after hours had been Volanda's and it had seemed like such a good one.

At the corner he looked at his watch. He knew the buses ran till ten; thank goodness, here came one now. He boarded and sank into a seat. Volanda was working the late shift and he'd promised to stop in and tell her how it went. It went crazy, but how could he tell her that? Simon stared out at the dark streets as the bus drove through Newtown. The nursing home where Volanda worked, Senior Years, was only a few blocks from her home. Simon had gotten very familiar with Senior Years in the last few months because of Uncle Willie.

He got off the bus and walked the block to Senior Years. It was at the end of the street across from the Baptist church. There was a service and the organ was playing "Silent Night." Less than a week till Christmas, Simon thought, dreading it.

He said to the woman at the desk, "Hi, Mrs. Bowles."

"Hello, Si. She's with your uncle."

"How is he?"

"Not good, honey."

The waiting room was dim and small and smelled of medicine. Mrs. Bowles took off her glasses and stood up.

"I'll tell her you're here."

"Thanks."

She went through some folding doors and Simon sat staring at the wall. Uncle Willie, whom he loved, was "not good." Of course, Uncle Willie hadn't been good in quite a while, but as Simon's mother would say, "He's darn good for eighty-two." But Mrs. Bowles had sounded different just now.

The folding doors reopened and Volanda came out. She was a year older than Simon, pretty and smart, and he felt lucky that she liked him. She wore the blue and white pantsuit of the nurse's aide and looked like a million in it. Her hair was in neat cornrows, her brown eyes alert. She beckoned to him.

"I want coffee."

They went down the hall to where the bright lights of the cafeteria and the smell of coffee were a little more cheering. Volanda headed for a big urn, looking back at Simon, her face eager and expectant. She said, "So how'd it go?"

"Sit down, babe. I'll bring it. You want a doughnut?"

"No thanks."

Simon carried two cups of coffee to the table. There was a scattering of other people and some of them nodded to him. Volanda leaned forward, chin in hands.

"So tell me."

"I forgot your cream."

"The heck with the cream. Si, *tell* me."

"Well, it worked and it didn't." Simon reached for the sugar dispenser. "I got in okay and got up to the room, but I was real nervous and I don't want to go back."

"*What?*" Her disappointment was instant.

He spoke very rapidly. "I kept worrying the whole time about what if I got caught. Besides, the light wasn't great."

"Si—" Volanda looked at him intently. "—were you seen? Is that it?"

He shook his head. At least he could say truthfully, "I swear, not one *living* person saw me."

"Then why?"

"It's too risky, Voley, and the basement door is going to be sealed up anyway. I'm not going back there ever again!" He stirred his coffee, looking down at it.

Volanda sat still for a few seconds, then pushed her cup away. "I guess it was a dumb idea."

"It wasn't, it wasn't!" He felt awful. "It was a great idea and you were a genius to think of it." He touched her hand. "It was you who told me to go work there in the first place, remember? And I love it. But I need to make better money." A newspaper lay on the chair beside him and Simon picked it up. "There's tons of places pay better than that museum."

Volanda pulled her coffee back and began to sip it. Simon felt worse than ever. "Mrs. Bowles said Uncle Willie is bad," he said.

"He is."

"Can I see him?"

"Finish your coffee first." She looked out the window at the dark street. "Funny. I got the idea from him."

"From who? What idea?" Simon was reading an ad for help at a Waffle House.

"The idea for you to work at the museum. I never told you, did I?"

"I guess not." He was intent on the ad. The place was near where he lived.

"I didn't want to make you feel bad."

"About what?" And it was open all night. He'd call as soon as he got home.

"Uncle Willie."

"What about him?"

"It seems that when he was a little kid he used to work for Mrs. Fox-Nugent. He was a stableboy. And one day she fired him for something he didn't do."

Simon sat so still and stared so hard at Volanda that he was afraid she'd ask what was the matter. But she was sipping her coffee and still looking out the window.

"He said he never told his parents because he was scared about something, I didn't catch what, so he just said Mrs. Fox-Nugent didn't need him any more. I guess it was a real blow to the family, losing the money and all. It happened around Christmastime, which made it worse. Poor guy. I guess he never got over it. He couldn't have been more than nine or ten when it happened."

"What did happen?" Simon kept his voice steady.

"I think he was accused of stealing something."

Simon, his heart pounding, put the newspaper down and leaned across the table. He said, "Tell me everything Uncle Willie told you."

Volanda looked surprised. "It's not important now, Si, just kind of sad."

"It's important to me. Believe me, it's important to me."

She folded her arms on the table. "Well, let me think . . ."

This was one of the things Simon liked about Volanda. She never told you to "forget it." If you told her something was important to you, she believed you. And man, was this important.

"I was giving him his bath one day—" Volanda smiled. "—and we got talking about you. I said I thought you were going to be a really good artist and Willie said he used to pay for your drawing lessons when you were a little kid because he'd always loved to draw too. 'Si gets it from me,' he said, real proud. Then all of a sudden he said, 'Maybe some day he'll paint a picture that'll hang in Mrs. Fox-Nugent's place, and he can tell her I wasn't a thief!' and he began to cry. That's when I got the idea that if you could sneak in there and copy that picture you like, well, you'd kind of get even with her for—Si! What's the matter?"

His chair had gone over backward as he leaped to his feet. "I gotta see Uncle Willie!"

"Sure, but what's the rush?"

"Come on!" Simon pulled Volanda across the cafeteria and halfway down the hall before she managed to yank her hand away.

"Simon Judson, what is this?"

"I'll explain later."

"You'll explain now." When Volanda stood like that with her arms folded you didn't mess around. Simon leaned against the wall, wanting to beat his fists into it. That arrogant, high and mighty hunk of mist telling him that Uncle Willie was a thief! But he had to stay cool, had to come up with something Volanda would buy.

"A guy from some magazine came in this morning. He's doing a story on the museum, and he was asking us if we knew any, well, out of the way facts about the place. I could tell him my uncle used to work there and if Willie can give me—"

"But you're quitting."

"No way!" Simon grabbed her hand again. "And I'm going back there tonight to paint!"

"Si," Volanda whispered as they went into the darkened room, "you're crazy. First you say it's too risky, then just because some writer—"

"Shh." He put his finger on her lips and they walked toward the bed beside the window. In one of the others a man sat up weakly and called to Volanda and she laid him gently down again. Simon couldn't tell at first if Uncle Willie was asleep. He was lying very still and in the dim light seemed tiny. He'd never been big; when Simon was twelve he was taller than Willie. But tonight the figure in the bed looked like a little kid. He seemed to have shrunk just in the last week.

Now Simon could see that the dim old eyes were open. Volanda went to the other side of the bed and leaned over. She said softly, "Your favorite person to see you, honey."

"Si?" The skinny little hand moved on the sheet. "That you, Si?"

"How you doin', Unc?"

"Doin' fine. I got Voley." He looked up at her the way you'd look up at an angel. Then his eyes moved and fastened on Simon. "What'd you paint today?"

"Oh, a couple of masterpieces." Simon sat on the bed and took the frail old hand.

"That's right!" Uncle Willie nodded with amazing vigor. "You just keep paintin' them masterpieces."

"But I'm mad at you."

"Mad at me? You mad at me, Si?" It was a distressed, cracked whisper and Volanda frowned and shook her head. Simon said quickly, keeping his voice low, "Not really mad—just kind of surprised. You've been telling Voley stuff you never told me. You been holding back on me, Unc."

Simon made his voice light and kidding and was relieved to see Willie smile a little. He said, "What I hold back?"

"Well, like how you used to be a stableboy for Mrs. Fox-Nugent."

The change in the old face was instant and awful. The eyes widened and there was a feeble effort to sit up. "But I never done

it! I never stole it! I just took the rolls that was already in the garbage pail!"

Simon's mouth went bone dry. Volanda gave him a mad look and gently pushed Willie's head back on the pillow. She said, "Don't think about it, dear. Simon's leaving now."

"What did Mrs. Fox-Nugent say you stole?" Simon held tight to the calloused little hand and didn't look at Volanda.

"He say I stole it. He tell her that!"

"Who? Who?"

"The big fella! Scared me to death! Say he cut my tongue out if I tell on him!"

"Who? Who was the big fella?"

"Simon!" Volanda started around the bed. Willie's head was turning back and forth on the pillow. He murmured, "That waiter. Fella came in to help at the dinner party."

Volanda grabbed Simon's shoulder and turned him around. "Are you nuts, making a disturbance in here at this hour? If I'd thought you were going to . . ."

But Simon did not hear the rest. He was striding to the door and now he was out of the place and running down the street. There were people on the sidewalk and he knew they turned and looked at him but he didn't care. He was madder than he'd ever been in his life. His mind was empty of everything but the sound of the quavering old voice and the words, "I never done it! I never stole it."

He reached the house on the corner where Volanda lived with her mother and two little brothers. As he pulled open the garage doors one of the little brothers called from an upstairs window, "You taking your bike, Si?"

"Sure am. What are you doing up at this hour, Tyrone?"

Volanda's mother came to the window and shooed the boy away. She said, "I only just dragged him out of that garage half an hour ago. He's been sitting in there all day looking at that motor-bike like it was something holy."

"I was guarding it for you, Si," came Tyrone's voice from the depths of his room.

"You shush and go to bed," Volanda's mother said. "Simon, where's Voley?"

"Still at work. I dropped in there. Thanks for guarding the bike, Ty."

He rolled it to the street, then got on and gunned it. He told himself not to go too fast. He didn't want to be stopped, no sir, not tonight. When he got back to Sapphire Drive he drove slowly to the museum entrance. Would his luck hold? The area was deathly

quiet and nice big clouds sailed over the moon. Simon ran the bike up the slope and along in the shadow of the wall to the crown of Neptune. He put down the stand and muttered, "Be a good guy, Nep, and guard it for me like Tyrone."

Now he was over the fence and down the ramp. As he put the key in the lock he looked at his watch; twenty minutes till Mr. O'Malley's rounds. Just time to face the lady down! Simon sped along the corridor and pulled up breathless before Dorothea's portrait. Scared to think she might actually reappear, but knowing he'd be furious if she didn't, he said aloud, "Dorothea! You owe me!"

The canvas quivered and dissolved, and she stepped out with her jewels flashing. Simon gulped, but hung onto his cool. Dorothea said, "What a vulgar expression. I owe you nothing."

"Oh, no?" He imitated her voice. "I once had a stableboy who was a Negro and he was also a thief. Well, he was also my uncle and he was no thief. He was just a poor little kid taking some garbage home to his family and you believed a creepy waiter who accused him of stealing. And don't tell me you don't remember it!"

"I remember it vividly." Her face had changed slightly. "The boy's name was Willie."

"Well, Willie's an old man now and he's never gotten over the rotten injustice of it." Simon knew his voice was shaking. "It screwed up his family too, and that's what I mean when I say you owe me and him."

He paused for breath and heard, to his dismay, a step on the stairs and saw the beam of an approaching flashlight. Simon dived behind the window draperies. He stuck his head out and whispered to Dorothea's shimmering form, "Scram, will you? That's the least you can do for me!"

But she remained there, motionless and bright. This is the end of me, Simon thought. No, he had one chance. He pulled his T-shirt up to his shoulders; if he covered his face with it and made a run for the hall . . . He peered through a tiny gap in the curtains. Mr. O'Malley stood in the door.

Dorothea said, "Be careful not to drag on those draperies. They're very old."

Mr. O'Malley beamed his light around the room and went off down the hall. Simon emerged, pulling his shirt down and staring at Dorothea.

"I'm the only one who can see you or hear you?"

"Certainly. You are the miscreant."

"What's a miscreant?"

"Someone who has done something wrong."

Simon said slowly, "Suppose someone has made a little kid's life miserable. Would that someone be a miscreant?"

Dorothea's light flared, then dimmed, flared, then dimmed, as if controlled by disturbed vibes. She said icily, "Will you have the common courtesy to listen to my side of the story?"

"Okay, okay. Don't blow a fuse." He walked to one of the big carved chairs that stood against the wall, sat down, and leaned back. "Sure. Let's hear your version, Dorothea."

"I suppose you realize," she floated to a chair against the opposite wall, "that it's very impudent of you to continue to call me Dorothea."

"Impudent?" Simon grinned. "Now, there's a word I do know. Uncle Willie used to say to me, 'You too impudent. You just quit being so fresh and impudent.'"

"A pity you didn't take his advice."

From across the room she looked like a blurry rainbow, the dark wood of the chair showing through her. Simon decided this was either happening or not happening, but in either case, he had to keep that cool. Dorothea said, "Willie must be your great uncle."

"My mom's uncle."

"Are your parents living?"

"I wouldn't know about my dad, he split a long time ago. I live with Mom. She teaches school in Sarasota."

"Where does Willie live?"

"With us till a year ago, then he got real sick and now he's in a nursing home in—hey!" Simon sat up straight. "What's with all the questions? I thought you were supposed to tell me—"

"Be quiet."

Dorothea drifted up from the chair and began to move about the room. Something told Simon not to say anything. He watched as she clasped and unclasped her hands and twisted her glittering rings. Then she stationed herself before the Van Zeller Nativity, her back to him.

"It was a beautiful, warm night just before Christmas in the year 1925. My husband and I had given a dinner party, then attended a concert. We returned home about eleven o'clock. The servants were still cleaning up. It had been a large party with tables in the garden and there were several hired waiters in addition to our own staff."

Dorothea turned and drifted back to the chair, hovering there. "We got out of the car and my husband stayed to speak to the chauffeur. I started up the steps to the front door. At that time the entrance to the château was on the east side—"

“—where steps of Italian marble led to the graceful doorway with a fan light.”

Simon hardly realized he was speaking; he'd uttered the words so often that he went on automatically. “But when the château became a museum in 1925 the entrance was changed to the west side of the building to accommodate a parking lot.”

Dorothea said, after a pause, “I always regretted that change. Those steps had such a lovely view of the gulf. I remember standing there that night listening to the waves.”

Was he crazy? Simon had the feeling of standing there beside her. He shook himself mentally and said, “Go on.”

“I was just about to enter the house when I heard voices coming from the kitchen garden that bordered the stable. One voice was loud and angry, the other young and frightened. I thought I recognized Willie's as the frightened one.”

Simon couldn't help saying, “How come you recognized the stableboy's voice? You couldn't have talked to him that much.”

“On the contrary, I talked to him quite often. Willie was a favorite of mine.”

That shuts me up, thought Simon. But he wasn't making any judgments about Dorothea till he'd heard her story.

“Willie,” her eyes traveled across the paintings over his head, “was very bright. Only a week before the night I'm speaking of, he had his tenth birthday. He told me that his whole family, and I gather it was a large one, had scraped together two dollars and bought him a set of drawing pencils. He loved to draw, but of course, you know that.”

Simon blinked his eyes to keep back sudden tears. He said as calmly as he could, “So you heard voices in the garden. What did you do?”

“I went back down the steps and along the walk. There was a full moon and I could see Willie and one of the hired waiters. They were scuffling and Willie was crying. As I came near them the man said something quickly to Willie, I don't know what.”

“I do.” Simon sat forward. “He said, ‘I'll cut your tongue out if you tell.’”

Dorothea looked at him in silence, then she said, “Naturally, I had no way of knowing that.” She moved, rather uncertainly, he thought, and went on, “I said, ‘Willie, what's the matter? Don't be afraid to tell me,’ but he just kept crying. The waiter said, ‘He stole that valuable napkin ring of yours, ma'am, the one with the blue stones, and I'm trying to get it back for you.’ I put my hand on the child's shoulder—I remember how it trembled—and said, ‘Willie,

if you've taken something that does not belong to you, all you have to do is give it back and we'll forget it, otherwise you'll have to be dismissed.' He suddenly tore himself loose and ran toward the gate. The waiter took off after him, but Willie was like a frightened rabbit and disappeared in the darkness. I felt very bad."

Simon waited. There had to be more. Then he said, "So?"

"So?" Her voice was at its haughtiest.

"So what did you do next?" He was getting impatient.

"There was nothing to do. The napkin ring was not recovered and Willie never came back."

"Of course he didn't." Simon was on his feet. "He was scared to death! Why didn't you send for him and give him a chance to—"

"Send for him?" Dorothea's light blazed. "My dear young man, have you any idea what the South was like in 1925? Why, children of the poor were often employed without even asking their last names. I couldn't have told you Willie's. No one on the staff knew where he lived and once he vanished he was like a drop of water in the gulf. And I repeat, the napkin ring was never recovered."

"Willie didn't take it. That lousy waiter did."

"That occurred to me, and standing there in the garden I explained to the man that the napkin ring was not valuable at all, that my husband had bought it for me from a street peddler in Madrid on our honeymoon, and that I cherished it for that reason alone. I told him it was probably worth about three dollars, as he'd find out if he tried to sell it. Then I offered him fifty dollars to return it. He was unable to produce it."

Simon said desperately, "There were other hired people. One of them—"

"Goodbye. Please leave the museum at once or I shall—"

"Wait! Please!" Three strides took him to her and involuntarily he put out his hand to detain her. He felt, instead of the satin of a sleeve or the flesh of a hand, only emptiness. She seemed to shrink from him. Simon stepped back bewildered, then suddenly laughed. He mimicked her tone again.

"'I shall touch the alarm and the police will come!' Honey, you can't touch anything, can you?" She was motionless and silent. "You can't even report me to the guard." He chuckled delightedly. "I'm the only one you can mess with, just me, the—what was that word?—the miscreant, right?"

Dorothea's light flared jaggedly but still she was silent. Simon began to stroll around the room. "Why, I could rip this place off and you couldn't do one thing about it." He turned and faced her. "You're a faker, Dorothea, and you're just lucky that I'm not a

thief." He walked to the Nativity. "Neither was Willie, and I'm going to prove it to you." He touched the painting lovingly. "It's too late tonight, Jesus, honey. But I'll be back tomorrow. We'll have two nights to put you and your folks on my canvas. And if Dorothea here wants to join us, why not? We can all rap about art. How about it, Dorothea?"

He turned, but she was a painting again.

Elated, Simon retraced his steps and reached his bike, but as he rolled it down the slope, his morale dissolved. Sure, he'd won the first round with Dorothea, but would she eventually get him on points? Uncle Willie's innocence had suddenly become the big issue, and how do you go about trying to right a seventy-year-old wrong when the accused person is dying and the accuser is dead—well, not *that* dead . . .

His brains in a knot, he tooled up Sapphire Drive in the inky darkness of one A.M., crossed South Trail, and reached Fortieth Street. His mother and Aunt Hannah had made their home real pretty. Aunt Hannah was Uncle Willie's twin sister, a ninety-pound cleaning machine. The garden was his mom's thing.

Simon got off the bike a little way down the street and walked it to his driveway. The garage was open. He rolled the bike in and secured it, wishing he didn't have to pull the door down but, of course, he must. The sound always woke his mother up, and he didn't feel like having to fake answers to her questions about how the movie was. As it turned out, he didn't have to.

The light in the breezeway was on. Simon walked through and into the kitchen. His mother and Aunt Hannah were sitting there, coffee mugs on the table. "What the heck are you two doing up?" he asked.

"Willie's very low, Si," his mother said.

"Couple of more days, they told us." Hannah's frail old hand trembled as she lifted her mug.

He couldn't say, "Yes, I know," so he sat down and asked, "When were you over there?"

"I went over after lunch," said his mother. "Then I came home and got Hannah and we went back for a while. Want some coffee?"

Simon shook his head, reached across the table, and squeezed his mother's hand. Then he reached for Hannah's, but she was clutching something on her lap.

"What's that?" he asked

"Oh . . ." She shrugged her skinny little shoulders and brought

up a worn brown paper bag. "I couldn't stop thinking about Willie when we got home and I dug this out of the closet. It's a bunch of old pictures. We've been looking at them and kind of crying some. That Willie, he was so handsome."

Simon looked at the bag, his heart beating a bit faster. "Are there any of him when he was a little boy?"

"Are you kidding? Who could afford a camera back then?" Hannah slid some of the pictures on the table and his mother reached for one. She said, "Here's my favorite. He was eighteen and he'd just enlisted in the army."

But Simon only glanced at the guy in the uniform. He'd caught a glimpse of a familiar face in a crumpled photo turning yellow. There were two people in it, a little black boy and a white woman. The boy could be any boy, even though he knew it was Willie, but the woman could only be one person. They were standing before the stable—how often Simon had described it as a model for its time—and Dorothea's arm was around Willie's shoulders.

"What you got there?" Hannah leaned over to look. "Oh, that's that rich lady Willie used to work for. She started that place you work in."

Simon couldn't take his eyes off the picture. The droopy little shirt, the ragged pants, the big smile, the encircling arm. Dorothea looked dashing in riding clothes; there were a lot of pictures of her in that outfit in the museum. He swallowed and said, "I wonder who took this."

"Most likely her husband. They was real fond of Willie. We thought it was mean of her to let him go, and at Christmastime too. He always felt bad about it."

Hannah reached for the picture, but he said, "Can I keep this?"

"Sure, honey."

He sat staring at it as Hannah limped to the door, grumbling about her arthritis. His mother was washing the mugs. She said, "What hours are you working tomorrow?"

"Noon to closing."

"Then you can go over and see Willie in the morning."

"Yeah, I will."

Good thing Volanda had worked late tonight; she wouldn't be there in the morning to bug him. He had to pump poor Willie for information while there was still the possibility of learning more.

When Simon walked into Senior Years at eight o'clock next morning the daytime lady, Mrs. Woodman, waved to him and he

went through the doors and into Willie's room. It was too early for visiting hours and there were still breakfast trays on beds and baths in progress, but everybody knew that Willie didn't have long. A nurse was holding a glass of juice under Willie's chin. She said, "Good timing, Simon. Make him take this."

"Sure." She drew the curtain around them and left. Simon sat on the side of the bed. Willie's mouth was set in a tight slit. He opened to say, "Why ain't you in school?"

"It's Christmas vacation."

"Then why ain't you painting?"

But Willie turned his head away and gazed out the window. He said, "Guess who I was talking to just now."

"Who?"

"My mama."

Simon was accustomed to Willie wandering in and out of time; today it could be useful. "What did your mama say?"

"She says she like that picture of the heron I done."

Perfect. "Now, that's a coincidence. I was just talking to somebody else who likes your pictures."

Willie's eyes turned back to him. "Who that?"

"Drink some of this and I'll tell you."

Willie sipped weakly. Simon put the glass down and said, "Mrs. Fox-Nugent." He waited but Willie didn't react, so he went on cautiously, "She asked me to tell you something."

"Mrs. Fox did?" Willie shook his head slowly. "No, she wouldn't have anything to say to me. She mad at me."

"Not any more," said Simon quickly. "She knows now you didn't steal that napkin ring."

"Napkin ring? Napkin Ring? What's that?" Willie's face was a blank, then it lit up. "Oh, you mean—why, I thought it was a lady's bracelet! And she knows I didn't steal it? Then she found it!"

"I guess so." Simon was at sea but kept going. "She didn't say where she found it, though. Would you know?"

"Oh, I'm so glad!" Willie was almost crying. "I was too scared to go back 'cause of that big fella so I give it back the best way I could and now she found it! Oh, that makes me so happy!"

What the heck was this? Simon said urgently, "Uncle Willie, what do you mean you 'gave it back'? You said you never took it."

"I didn't! I didn't!" The voice was going shrill.

"Simon!" Volanda stood beside him. "Are you on this kick again?"

Simon said sulkily, "What do you do, work here around the clock?"

"Practically, when we're shorthanded."

"Voley." Willie was struggling to sit up. "She found it! Mrs. Fox found that thing!"

"Sure she did, honey, and why isn't this juice gone?" She held the straw to his lips. "Come on, a sip for me and a sip for Si and a sip for your mama and a—"

"First he says he didn't take it—" Baffled, Simon stood up. "—and then he says he gave it back. It doesn't make sense."

"It doesn't have to!" Volanda was really mad now. "And I wish I'd never said a word about all this. If I'd thought you were going to get so hung up . . ."

But Willie had begun to talk quietly, his eyes closed. "Oh, them soft white rolls her cook used to make, and half the time they didn't all get ate up, bits of 'em, sometimes whole rolls in the garbage pail on the back porch. Oh, I'd fill my pockets . . . especially that night with all the company I knew they'd be throwing stuff away, maybe even meat, and I waited and waited and the dinner party was done and big hunks and chunks start coming out to the pail and I'm filling my pockets and even my shirt and then—" His eyes flew open. "—out he come!"

"Who? The big fella?" Simon looked imploringly at Volanda, but she said nothing, maybe because Willie's voice was so steady. But she had her finger on his wrist.

"Oh, my, was he big!" The eyelids drooped again. "And he starts going through the garbage hisself like he was crazy, and I got scared and run down the steps, but he run after me yelling that something wasn't in the pail that he put there hisself so I must have took it and he starts pulling stuff out of my pockets and then," the eyes opened again, "Mrs. Fox come."

Tears began to roll down Willie's cheeks. Simon took Volanda's hand and said in a half whisper, "This is the first time he's ever been able to tell anybody what happened. We gotta let him finish." He sat down on the bed again. "And then you made a run for it, didn't you?"

"Oh, did I run!" Willie clutched at the sheet. "I got out of that gate and halfway across the field in the dark, not even knowing where I was going, just grabbing my pockets to see if I had anything left, and then I felt it!"

Simon knew that Volanda had drawn closer to the bed and was listening as breathlessly as he was. Suddenly Willie's arm shot up in the air.

"I pulled it out—it was still half stuck inside a roll—and I could see by the moon it was something shiny. I thought it was a lady's bracelet and I was so scared I nearly went to the ground. I had to

get it back to Mrs. Fox but I knew the big fella was waiting to cut my tongue out so how could I? So I just did the best I could and now she's found it and I can go back to work for her and not be scared no more."

The weak old voice stopped and Willie, smiling, seemed to doze. Volanda whispered, "Let him sleep."

"But how did he give it back?" Simon was frantic.

"Come down to the cafeteria. I bet I know."

Volanda leaned forward, her elbows on the table. She said, "First, tell me where it was found."

"Where what was found?"

"The napkin ring, of course."

Simon gasped and said the coffee was too hot. "It was never found. I just said that to make him feel happy."

She looked disappointed, then touched his hand. "That was nice, Si. I'm glad you did it." She brightened. "But it could have been found. Want to hear how?"

Simon nodded somewhat dazedly. Her sudden interest delighted and alarmed him. He had this nutty secret to keep . . .

Volanda said slowly, "Here's what I think happened: Willie ran back toward the château and when he got near the gate," her eyes sparkled with excitement, "he threw the napkin ring over it, then beat it for home."

Simon stared at her. "He . . . threw it . . . over the gate? But if it landed in the garden why wasn't it found?"

"Why should it be? Nobody was looking for it."

They sat in silence for a few seconds, then Simon said, "If I thought there was even the slightest chance, I'd search that garden with my bare hands."

Volanda shook her head as she stood up. "After all the years and all the changes . . ."

"I know. Hopeless." He swallowed his coffee and thought for a moment.

Volanda said, "I hope you're going back to paint tonight."

"I sure am. And tomorrow night too. I owe it to Willie. If I could only—"

"Si," her voice was gentle, "you've given that dear old soul peace of mind at the end. That must make you very happy."

It did. But how could he tell her that another, overwhelming urge was blotting everything else from his mind?

A ghost had to be convinced of Willie's innocence.



"So it made sense right away when Volanda said that." Simon mixed his reds, looking back and forth at the Nativity.

Dorothea hovered behind him. She said, "You're quite good."

"I'm quite crazy. This light is terrible. But Van Zeller and I are alone together. That's what matters."

"Alone?" Her voice was sharp. "That's hardly courteous. May I remind you that I am also present?"

"And may I remind *you* that you're crashing the party?" Simon put his brush down and stretched. He'd been working for more than an hour. "Can't you just see the poor little guy pitching the thing over the gate and figuring he was 'giving it back'?" Dorothea drifted a short distance away. "You buy it, don't you?"

"Buy it? I don't understand."

"You believe now that Willie didn't steal the napkin ring?"

"I believe that he didn't take it, but not that he didn't keep it."

Simon glared at her. "What the heck do you mean?"

She said slowly, almost reluctantly, "It did occur to me that the ring may have dropped when Willie was being chased, and I had every inch of the grounds thoroughly searched the next day. My workmen fine-combed the entire garden."

Simon sat still. "So you still think he stole it?"

"I think," her voice was oddly gentle, "that a little boy who was very poor and who suddenly found himself in possession of what appeared to be a valuable article would find it very hard not to keep it."

Simon began to burn. "What about him saying he gave it back?"

"Perhaps he thinks he did. He's very old and you say his mind wanders."

"Willie was reliving that night clear as a bell." Simon was on his feet. "He remembers thinking it was a piece of jewelry and he kept saying 'I gave it back! I gave it back!'"

"Then where is it? And I believe the guard is due presently."

Startled—he'd been so absorbed he'd forgotten to watch the time—Simon slid all his gear behind the long tapestry on a table, snapped out the light and dove behind the curtains as a light flickered in the hall.

"I explored one other possibility," Dorothea said as Mr. O'Malley's light beamed around the room. Simon wished she wouldn't do this. He realized the man couldn't see or hear her, but it gave him the jitters to think of her shimmering away out there and talking casually. "I inquired at the pawnshop—there was only one in Sarasota—and nothing of the kind had been brought in."

Mr. O'Malley moved on and the sound of his footsteps faded.

Simon emerged and snapped on the lights. He said, "How would a ten-year-old kid know anything about a pawnshop?"

"He probably wouldn't, but his parents might."

Simon turned around so fast he'd have bumped into her if there had been anything to bump into. "Sure, that's what you think! He'd give it to his folks and they'd pawn it!"

"I only mention it because—"

"—because it's what you figure a poor black family would do."

"Correction: any poor family." Her light blazed. "My own family was very poor. We lived in a New York City slum and there were many trips to pawnshops. I had no money at all when I married Everett Fox-Nugent. He bought me that cheap little trinket because I liked it, but he said, 'I'll teach you to recognize beautiful jewelry and great art,' and he did. He was a dear, kind man, and that napkin ring lay at my place at the table every day. I treasured it, and when it was lost I offered a reward of one hundred dollars for its return."

Simon had stood motionless as she spoke. Now he pulled his gear out from behind the table and sat down. He looked at his paints but he couldn't make his hands move. There was no sound behind him and for a few seconds he thought Dorothea had departed. He turned his head slightly and knew she was still there. He made himself reach for his brush, and said, "I wish you'd get back up in that painting and stop bugging me."

"What is your opinion of that painting, by the way?"

"I suppose it looks like you."

Dorothea sailed around him and stood directly before the Nativity. "Such a question calls for a gracious answer, something complimentary or gallant. You have no manners."

"Neither do you, sister. You're standing right in my way."

She moved to one side and her voice quivered a little. "I was never really beautiful but I had good hair and a fine figure. Everyone said I had a fine figure."

Simon suddenly felt almost sorry for her. He gave her a quick look up and down, winked, and said, "And for once everyone was right."

The effect of those words was astonishing. Dorothea's light turned bright pink. Was she blushing? She drifted toward her frame and said in the gentlest tone he'd heard her use, "I'm sorry about Willie and I respect your loyalty to him. Good night, Simon."

It was the first time she had spoken his name and it affected him strangely. He stood up quickly. "Dorothea, wait." She turned. "Tomorrow is my last night here."

"And mine too."

"Maybe . . . between now and then . . ." He began to feel the futility of his words even as he spoke them. "Willie can tell me something that will prove . . ."

"Of course, that would be splendid."

And of course, that will be impossible, Simon thought as she stepped into the frame. He closed his eyes, suddenly unable to bear being in this room another minute, unable to face the thought of returning without tangible proof of Willie's innocence. Tomorrow night Dorothea would probably be kind and forgiving as they said good-bye, but he didn't think he'd like her kind and forgiving; he liked her haughty and challenging. He took his picture from the easel—it was almost done and he could finish it from memory—and leaned it against the door. He carried his gear to the locker, then came back to the room and walked to the light switch. He stood looking at the painting of Dorothea, then whispered, "So long, Dorothea, it's been real." He began to laugh a little, but he knew the laugh had some cry in it. Had he half fallen in love with a dead white woman twice his age whom he would never see again? What a hoot. He snapped off the light.

Simon picked up his picture, holding the wet canvas at arm's length, and walked down the corridor. He descended the stone steps, forgetting that at the bottom was a statue of a satyr, one hoof playfully extended. The next thing he knew his painting had clattered to the floor and Mr. O'Malley was running toward him with his torch and yelling, "Simon? Si?" in a horrified voice.

Of course, it was awful an hour later—the sun was barely up—when Simon called Volanda and told the sleepy, bewildered girl to come to his house right away. When she arrived he sat her down at the kitchen table with his equally sleepy mother and Aunt Hannah and told them everything.

Everything except, of course, about Dorothea.

All three women began to talk at once. His mother said that at least he hadn't committed any crime but she couldn't believe he'd have been such an idiot. Volanda cried and said it was all her fault, and Aunt Hannah didn't seem to know just what had happened, but if it was bad she was grateful Willie wouldn't know about it.

Simon stood up. "I'm going over to see him now."

His mother said, "You haven't slept in twenty-four hours and he won't know you now."

"I just want to sit with him."

Volanda stood up. "I'll drive you." When they were alone in the car she said, "Of course, you'll be fired."

"Oh, sure. Maybe worse. I have to go back there at eleven o'clock and face the board of directors. At least my boss trusted me to come home. Mr. O'Malley told him why I was there."

Volanda started to say, "I wish I hadn't . . ."

Simon touched her hair and said, "Let's not wish anything." Except, he thought, that Dorothea could have known Willie tried. *I gave it back the best way I could.* Oh, Unc, honey, what way was that?

An hour later he woke up wondering where he was. Someone was shaking him and saying it was ten thirty and if he didn't show up at the museum they'd be madder than ever at him. It was Volanda and he was in a chair beside Willie's bed. A tall man was standing on the other side, his finger on the frail wrist. Volanda said, "This is Dr. Francis."

Simon struggled up and said, realizing it sounded dumb, "How is he?"

"He's in a coma. He'll probably slip away today or tomorrow."

The doctor nodded to them and walked away. Volanda said, "Want me to drive you to the museum?"

"No, just back to my house for my bike. When they let me go, if they do, I'm coming back here."

A half hour later Simon set the brake on his bike and drew a deep breath. There were only three cars in the parking lot. The museum wasn't open on Monday, for which he was grateful; he didn't feel like facing any of his co-workers. He walked into the office prepared for anything except what followed.

Sitting around were five people: his boss, Mr. Lucas, looking grim; Mr. O'Malley looking anxious; two old guys looking serious; and an old lady looking curious. She wore a big straw hat perched on top of frizzy white hair. One of the old guys started to talk right away.

"Sit down—er—Simon, isn't it? This is most distressing for all of us but we're going to do our best to be fair. Above all, none of this must get into the media. We do have to discharge you, I'm sure you know that."

"Yes, sir."

"The inventory people have been here since six o'clock this morning. There appears to be nothing missing and nothing damaged. But you did enter the museum illegally. How?"

"With this key." Simon laid it on the desk. "It's a copy of the one to the basement storeroom, and it's no good now because that entrance is getting boarded up."

Old Guy Two said, "We're told that in addition to working in the museum you are also a student at the Ringling School of Art and that you wanted to copy a painting here."

"Yes, sir."

There was a pause when nobody knew what to say. Then Old Guy One said, "The security doesn't seem to be—"

"Nothing wrong with security," Simon said quickly. "Mr. O'Malley never missed his rounds. He couldn't have spotted me, I was too careful. There was nothing to spot." Unless, he closed his eyes, unless you're a certain kind of miscreant, then you'll be spotted by a pair of eyes flashing like jewels.

The old lady, who was about the size of Aunt Hannah, began to chuckle. She said, "You must have wanted to paint that picture very much, young man."

"Yes, ma'am, I did."

"And museums have stuffy rules, don't they?"

"I guess they have to."

Mr. Lucas had been fidgeting. He said, "Well, the important thing is that none of this gets out, especially considering tonight."

What was tonight? Simon searched his memory. Weddings were often held on the museum grounds and there was a big one tonight. Guides were needed to show guests around, but Simon hadn't signed up because of Uncle Willie.

Mr. Lucas went on, "When you clear out your locker, leave your blazer here in the office." He took an envelope from the desk drawer. "This is two weeks' pay. I think you'll agree we're being generous considering the circumstances."

"You sure are." Simon stood up. "And thanks for not giving me a hard time. I loved working here and I'm sorry I loused up."

The old lady suddenly said, "Where is it?"

Simon moved to the door. "Where's what, ma'am?"

"The picture you painted."

"I confiscated it, Mrs. Mills," Mr. Lucas said hastily. "It's right here." He turned it around where it stood against the wall.

"Why, it's the Van Zeller Nativity, one of my favorites." She reached for a cane that lay across the chair beside her and stood up. "Give it to me . . . Not bad at all." She extended the painting to Simon. "Finish it—at home, needless to say." She chuckled, "I just might buy it."

Nobody was saying anything, least of all Simon, who was speechless. Mrs. Mills went on, still chuckling, "That was quite a caper, Simon, and I for one almost wish you'd gotten away with it. I can just picture you sitting there under Dorothea's very nose. She must have been turning in her grave. I knew her, you see."

Simon wanted to cry, "So did I!" He said, "Did you, ma'am?"

"Yes, Dorothea and I were great friends. She was considerably

older, of course, and she taught me a lot about art. You might say she was a bit of a know-it-all, but you couldn't help loving her."

No, no you couldn't.

Mrs. Mills waved her cane to the men who stood like dummies—this lady sure was head honcho—and walked to the door. Simon opened it and went out after her. She was still talking.

"My husband and I were collectors too, but not nearly on the scale of the Fox-Nugents. I remember once . . ."

She chatted on and Simon felt obliged to listen even though he desperately wanted to get back to Uncle Willie. So he stood there patiently and was glad afterwards that he did.

"And one of Dorothea's treasures was something we gave her, a silver soup tureen, attributed to—"

"—the great German silversmith, Erich Bonhof, circa 1750." Simon smiled down on her. "Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Kenneth Mills and used by the Fox-Nugents at all important dinners."

Mrs. Mills burst out laughing, pushing her straw hat back on her head. "Young man, you've certainly done your homework." She went on to lecture him on his stupidity in blowing the job, but Simon hardly heard her. Two words in his speech about the soup tureen had triggered something in his head. He said, "Mrs. Mills, I'll bet you and your husband were invited to a lot of those important dinners."

"All of them."

"Did you ever notice anything, well, unusual about Dor, er, Mrs. Fox-Nugent's place at the table?"

She looked at him in surprise. "You mean that lumpy little napkin ring with the fake stone?"

"Yes."

"Heavens, I haven't thought about that in years. And they told you about it in your course? Yes, it had some sort of sentimental value and Dorothea was very upset about its loss. As I recall, it was stolen—around Christmastime, I think—by some child who worked on the place and who—"

"—who is my uncle," Simon knew his voice was shaking, "who never stole anything in his life and who is dying right now so I'd like to go be with him. Thanks for returning my painting."

He almost ran down the hall, his eyes blinded by tears. He mopped them as he threw stuff from his locker into a tote, picked up his easel, and went down the back stairs and around the garden to the parking lot. He strapped the easel and his painting to the bike and thought, as he coasted down the driveway, that he must have dreamed everything that had happened and that it would be good to work at a down-to-earth place like the Waffle House.

He had to wait half an hour before the manager could see him but the guy was nice and said he could start Friday. Simon thanked him and went out and sat on his bike, staring at the side of the building. This had to be the right thing to do. He'd blown it at the museum and let his family down. Aunt Hannah was right; it was a good thing Uncle Willie never had to know. Uncle Willie. Simon started up and headed for Senior Years. As soon as he turned into the street he knew something was weird.

Simon drove down the block to where a Rolls Royce was parked before Senior Years. A man sat at the wheel reading a newspaper and a bunch of people were standing around staring at the car. Simon secured his bike and walked up to the front window. He said, "Mind if I ask whose car?"

"Mrs. Kenneth Mills. She's visiting somebody in there."

Simon went inside. A slightly dazed Mrs. Woodman was standing at the window gazing out at the Rolls. She said, looking at him in awe, "The lady wants to see you. She's with your uncle."

Simon walked into Willie's room, not liking this. Whatever crazy reason Mrs. Mills might have for coming here, it would only remind him of Dorothea and the museum and he wanted to forget both. There was the big straw hat, and beside it was Volanda, who hurried toward him with a bewildered shrug. Mrs. Mills was sitting beside Willie's bed gazing calmly at the quiet face. She said, "Simon, I told this young lady that I do have a reason for coming here, because if you think I'm following you around just because you're young and handsome you're only partially right."

Volanda began to giggle and Simon looked into the twinkling old eyes under the hat, then at Uncle Willie. He said, "I don't think we should talk here."

"Quite right." Mrs. Mills stood up and reached for her cane. "I just wanted to see this gentleman, the one you said was accused of theft so long ago but didn't do it. Where can we discuss this?" Mrs. Mills looked at Volanda. "Will you come with us?"

She said, "Si, go to the cafeteria with Mrs. Mills. I should stay here. There might be a—a—change."

Simon put his lips to the side of Volanda's head, then walked beside the wiry old lady to the door. She said, "Is the coffee here any good?"

"Not bad. How did you find this place, Mrs. Mills?"

"I asked at the museum for your home phone number and your aunt said you'd be here."

Simon knew that curious eyes followed him as he and his odd companion entered the packed cafeteria and looked for a cleared table.

There wasn't one, so Mrs. Mills sat herself down in the first empty chair and started pushing dishes aside. Simon said, "Let me—"

"I've seen dirty dishes before. Get the coffee, black for me. I want to show you what I found in Dorothea's desk."

Simon's heart did a thump. He went to the urn and poured two cups. When he got back to the table Mrs. Mills was opening her handbag. She pulled out a worn leather book and a pair of glasses and said, "Did they tell you in your instruction course that she kept a diary?"

"They told us she kept a strict record of all her art purchases."

"I mean a personal diary. I was pretty sure it would still be up in her living quarters to which I have access. Sure enough, it was in her desk. You're right, this coffee isn't bad."

She sipped appreciatively, then began turning the stiff, yellowing pages of the book. Even looking at it sideways Simon recognized Dorothea's handwriting—it was all over the museum—and now here it was at his elbow about to speak to him before he was born.

"Listen to this." Mrs. Mills pressed the book open and started to read. " 'December 20, 1925. Something very upsetting happened last night after the dinner for the ambassador. Our little stableboy apparently stole the utterly valueless but dear to me napkin ring that Everett bought me on our honeymoon. He ran off with it after a scuffle with a hired waiter. I'm very upset. I like the child. I hope he has the courage to return it. I'll reward him.' "

Simon sat like a statue as Mrs. Mills turned some pages. She read on. " 'No sign yet of little Willie. None of the servants seem to know where his home is or I'd go there. I suppose I'll forget the whole episode in time. Why does it trouble me? Probably because the child was too appealing.' "

Mrs. Mills closed the book and picked up her cup. "So you see, she cared enough about the boy to feel bad that he would steal something. Doesn't that make you feel better?"

"No," Simon said, feeling worse, "because he didn't steal anything. Some waiter stuck the napkin ring in a roll and Willie got it by mistake. He tried to give it back but he can't remember how." He knew Mrs. Mills was looking at him in bewilderment, but what was the point of going into it? He stood up. "Thanks for coming here, Mrs. Mills, and for reading me that."

"Simon," she put her hand on his arm, "I want you to go back to work at the museum."

He looked at her in astonishment. "I've been fired, remember?"

"Not if I say you haven't." He believed her. "As the senior member of the board, I have the last word on such matters and I think you should return."

"No!" It burst from him. "I never want to see the place again!"

Was she pleased that he sounded so shaken? He didn't care.

"You're being childish. It's the ideal job for you. Admit that you love it there." *I did, I did, until . . .* "You just made a silly mistake that didn't hurt anybody or anything." She handed him her cup. "Get me a touch more. Besides," she began to smile, "I rather think Dorothea would agree with me."

Oh, you don't know her as I do! She wanted to throw me out!

"So report to the museum tonight for that wedding. Bring that pretty nurse with you. The bride's grandmother is a friend of mine and we lug all our friends to these things. I get the impression that Volanda—charming name—is special to you. Now, my coffee, please."

Simon walked to the urn in a turmoil, paid for the coffee, and followed Mrs. Mills down the hall. At the front door she drained her cup and handed it to him, smiling brightly. "See you tonight."

Volanda said of course he should go. "And of course you'll go back to work there! She's a sweetie!" When Volanda was excited her brown eyes had lights in them. "Oh, Si, I'm so happy!"

"I'll only go tonight if you will."

She thought for a minute. "Sure, I'll come later if your mom or Aunt Hannah can come here." She put her arms around him. "Si, don't laugh, but it's almost as if Mrs. Fox-Nugent knew and was trying to make it up to Willie."

But he was sick at heart because Mrs. Fox-Nugent still thought he was a thief.

Simon loved to see the museum lit up for Christmas. Add a wedding and, wow.

Cars lined Sun Circle and halfway up Sapphire Drive, which meant the parking lot was full. As he walked his motorbike up the driveway, music floated down from the garden. He walked into the office where five guides were already assembled and retrieved his blazer from the back of the chair. Somebody asked what it was doing there and he said the lining had needed mending. He put it on, hoping that its presence here meant that Mrs. Mills had broken the news of the miscreant's return. Apparently she had, for when Mr. Lucas came in his eyes flicked past Simon with no signs of surprise and he began to speak quickly, looking hot and nervous in his white dinner jacket.

"You all know these private affairs require extra vigilance. The grounds are where you'll be needed first. The ceremony will be held in the Neptune Grove followed by dinner and dancing. It's supposed to stay warm so everything will happen out there and

people can ask you about the outdoor exhibits. No indoor tours till after the tables are removed. The bride's mother says you're welcome to help yourselves at the buffet, but keep circulating and be available for questions. There are some young children, so watch out they don't climb on things."

"They love the Etruscan bull," said somebody.

"And St. Francis's wolf," said somebody else.

"Well, this is a museum, not a playground." Mr. Lucas's voice was growing irritated. "Just keep your eyes open." He took a paper from his desk. "There are about a hundred guests, so when the tours start, make it groups of twenty. We don't want to be here all night. Go in this order."

A paper was passed around and Simon saw that his name had been added in pencil at the bottom of the list. Good. Volanda would be late; they could leave together.

"Come meet your hostess," said Mrs. Mills as they filed out to the hall. She'd replaced her hat with a red hibiscus stuck jauntily in her hair and wore a long, flowered dress. Simon felt a real fondness for her as she smiled around at them, winked openly at him, and preceded them to the garden.

Brilliant flares in each corner, candles on the tables, and a magnificent Christmas tree made the music-filled enclosure an enchanted place. Guests laughed and chatted and circled the buffet. Simon wondered, was it like this the night that Willie waited and waited to get at the garbage pail?

Mrs. Mills led them to a tall, rather distracted-looking woman talking to the bandleader. She nodded to them, asked that when the band played "Here Comes the Bride" would they please round up everybody who might be wandering around looking at statues or whatever and get them over to the Neptune Grove for the ceremony. Then she said she really appreciated their coming and the bar was over there.

Simon got a soda and turned to find Mrs. Mills behind him. She said, "You're a good sport."

"I'm a good sport? I feel so darned lucky to be back I don't know what to say, except thank you."

"That'll do."

He looked around the lovely, flickering scene floating in music. "Was it like this the night . . . ?"

"Very like. Not a wedding, of course, but quite a grand affair in honor of the French ambassador. I remember. Dorothea wore the blue satin evening gown she was painted in because it was designed in Paris." Her eyes fastened on his face. "Simon, you started to tell

me something about Willie this afternoon but you didn't finish. What was it?"

The music seemed very far away. He said, almost mechanically, "Willie was already out that gate when he found the napkin ring buried in a roll in his pocket. He was scared to death of the waiter who'd stolen it so he gave it back to Mrs. Fox-Nugent the best way he knew how. Those are his words, 'I gave it back the best way I knew how.' Volanda thinks he threw it over the gate, in which case," Simon looked around in a near trance, "it's in this garden somewhere."

"Young man," said a voice at his side, "can you tell me about the marble geese at the fishpond?"

"No one can tell you better." Mrs. Mills smiled and moved away. Simon followed a stout woman with many bangles toward the pond. He began automatically.

"The geese were among the first acquisitions of Mr. and Mrs. Fox-Nugent, who found them in Spain. Originally there were six, but two were damaged in transit from Barcelona. They are believed to be the work of Carlos de León, a fourteenth century worker in marble. Also, notice the mosaic around the pool's edge . . ."

As Simon talked, other guests gathered and he moved from object to object, hardly knowing what he was saying. Somewhere in these shadowy grounds a little trinket lay buried, trodden deep in the course of decades, proof positive that Willie, in those bewildering words of his, had "never taken it but gave it back."

Simon herded his group toward Neptune's grove as a procession of bridesmaids emerged from the side door of the museum, followed by the pretty bride and her father. Simon's eyes wandered to Neptune looming high above the wall, his harpoon lifted. It was that iron crown backed by the moonlit sky that had guided him to the gate the last two nights.

The ceremony began, and from the back of the crowd where Simon stood, the elderly clergyman's voice was faint and indistinct. Simon strolled over to the gate and stood looking through its tracery at the shining path across the gulf. He was thinking of Dorothea's words, "I remember standing on the steps that night listening to the waves." And as she stood there Willie was wrestling with the waiter and crying.

I gotta just forget the whole thing, Simon thought desperately. I gotta forget it right now and for good.

Suddenly, the bandleader was announcing the bouquet toss. The bride was standing on a chair and a lot of the girls were gathering with much laughing and squealing. The band did a flourish, and whoosh! That great bunch of flowers and ribbons sailed high in the air and landed smack in Neptune's crown!

There was a burst of laughter and shouting. Like a flash Simon was through the crowd, reaching Neptune none too soon. A couple of kids were already scrambling up on the base.

"Better let me do it," he said, pulling the children off as some of the other guides converged to ask if he could handle it.

Simon put one foot on the base and pulled himself up by the tail of the dolphin. Then he grasped the harpoon and climbed higher. More laughter and applause; cameras clicked, camcorders whirled, and the band did a drum roll. Simon smiled to himself, enjoying the escapade and wishing Volanda was here to see him being a hero. When he reached Neptune's shoulder, he hung one arm around the neck and put his other hand up to grab the bouquet. The darned thing was wedged into the crown and he had to get his hand down under it to pry it loose.

Then his fingers touched a small object that rattled.

He froze, suddenly dizzy. He drew a tremendous, deep breath, pulled out the bouquet, and dropped it into the outstretched arms of the bride. She called "Thanks!" and tossed it over her shoulder. There was a laughing scramble and all heads turned to see who'd caught it. Simon put his hand back in the crown and closed his fingers over the object. He dropped it into his blazer pocket and started to descend. A cheer went up as he jumped to the ground and there were joking words of praise and pats on the back. Through a sort of haze he saw Mrs. Mills beckoning to him from the museum door. He made his way toward her, his hand in his pocket, clasping the gritty little thing he'd not yet looked at.

Mrs. Mills said, "Let me see it."

"How do you know?"

"I saw your face and saw you put your hand back."

Simon took his hand from his pocket and opened his fingers. They looked down at a rusty little circle embedded with dirty stones. He said, "Is this it?"

"That's it."

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is the last room on your tour. As you leave, kindly take the stairs to your right and rejoin the other guests in the garden. Now, please observe the painting directly behind me. It is a portrait in oils of Dorothea Fox-Nugent, founder of this museum. She is wearing . . ."

Please, please everybody leave and give me a few minutes alone with her.

"... commissioned by her husband for the opening of the museum on her fortieth birthday . . ."

I want to show it to her and watch that crazy glow around her light up and hear her thank me and tell me where she wants it kept.

"Observe that she is wearing a diamond tiara, necklace, and earrings. This was her favorite jewel and . . ."

And now she will know that Willie wasn't a thief, wasn't a thief, wasn't a thief . . .

"Young man," said a guest, "have I heard correctly that the Copley is on loan from the Museum of Fine Art in Boston?"

Simon answered the question, wild with impatience. He'd been waiting for this moment since Mrs. Mills had told him to put the ring back in his pocket until they could decide what to do with it. "It's very exciting," she said, "to have a piece of lost memorabilia show up under such dramatic circumstances. The media will love it. I'll speak to the board tomorrow."

And I'll speak to Dorothea tonight, Simon had thought happily. But would these gabby wedding guests ever leave? Finally, with a pounding heart, he showed the last of them to the door, only to have Mrs. Mills walk though it.

"Simon, I've just had the most wonderful idea. Let me tell you about it."

His heart sank. "Sure, er, why don't you wait for me downstairs? I should check the rest of the floor before I—"

"Look at her." Mrs. Mills walked over to Dorothea's portrait. "She'd be so happy if she knew, wouldn't she?" Then she took a paper from her handbag and sat down in one of the carved chairs. "I've been working on this for an hour and I think it sounds very good. I'll give it to the newspapers tomorrow."

Simon stood helpless and silent as she read, "In the year 1925, a few days before Christmas, a cherished keepsake disappeared from the home of Dorothea Fox-Nugent, founder of Sarasota's famed museum. At the time, Mrs. Fox-Nugent offered a reward of one hundred dollars for its return. The keepsake, a napkin ring, was found yesterday on nearly the anniversary of its loss, on the museum grounds, by Simon Judson, a tour guide there. The circumstances . . ."

"Simon! You found it!"

Dorothea's light filled the room dazzlingly. Mrs. Mills, oblivious, of course, went on reading.

"Oh, let me see it!" Dorothea was close at his side, her mist enveloping him. Simon took the little ring from which he'd washed the dirt and held it in his palm. "Yes! That's it! The dear, dear thing! If only I could touch it! Where did you find it?"

"Simon," said Mrs. Mills, "you're not listening to me. Put that away till we can decide where it should be kept."

"In Neptune's crown," said Simon.

"In Neptune's crown? Of course!" cried Dorothea. "Willie threw it over the gate and it landed in—"

"Neptune's crown?" said Mrs. Mills. "Don't be absurd. It can't be kept there. It should have a very special place. I'd say in this room."

"She's right, dear Lettie Mills." Dorothea floated toward her. "What a good friend she was."

Mrs. Mills said, "So what do you think of my wonderful idea?"

"Idea?" said Simon and Dorothea together.

"I knew you weren't listening. Let me read it again." She looked at her paper. "The museum will be pleased to issue the reward to Mr. Judson, but because at today's rate, one hundred dollars would be considerably more, the board will take this into consideration."

"Splendid!" Dorothea's light glowed.

"I really . . ." Simon was fighting sadness and happiness both. ". . . don't want a reward."

"Of course you want a reward," said Dorothea and Mrs. Mills together. Mrs. Mills added, "Now about a place to keep the napkin ring." She got up and began to walk about the room.

"Simon," said Dorothea quickly, "that wrought-iron table you used for your paints—go to it." He did and stood looking at it; never again would he dip his brush there and argue with her and be sassy and get scolded. "Just beside the shepherdess there's a black lacquer box from China. Lettie gave it to me."

"This?" He picked it up.

"What?" Mrs. Mills turned, then came toward him, all smiles. "I gave her that. Do you think she'd like to keep the ring in it?"

"I know she would." Simon dropped it in the box. Dorothea was drifting toward her painting. He said imploringly, "Volanda is coming. I wish you could see her."

"I did," said Mrs. Mills. "Remember, this afternoon? Lovely girl."

"Is this she?" Dorothea was looking at the door. Volanda stood there and Simon knew at once what had happened. She ran to him, crying, and they clung together.

Mrs. Mills said, "Uncle Willie?"

Volanda nodded and Simon lifted her chin so she was looking full over his shoulder at the painting.

Dorothea said, "If she's this lovely when she's sad, she must be radiant when she's happy. Thank you, Simon," her voice was growing fainter, "thank you . . . thank you . . . and Merry Christmas!"

Mrs. Mills said, "You know, it's funny. A minute ago I had the impression that the painting of Dorothea looked, well, faded. Now it seems to be quite itself again. It must be the light." 🐦

REEL CRIME

STEVE HOCKENSMITH

From the beginning, Alfred Hitchcock's *Mystery Magazine* has had a connection to Hollywood. After all, it's not called *Edgar Allan Poe's Mystery Magazine* or *Agatha Christie's Mystery Magazine*. It's named for the master of movie suspense, a man who raised the fine art of spine-tingling to new heights through a series of classic films and a groundbreaking TV series.

As AHMM approaches its fiftieth year, it's only natural that we should celebrate the magazine's past—while looking to its future. So starting this month, we're bringing Alfred Hitchcock's *Mystery Magazine* into the Media Age with this new column, "Reel Crime," a behind-the-scenes peek at the thrillers, chillers, and crime dramas coming soon to a theater or TV screen near you.

We're kicking things off with a winter movie preview catering to crime fiction fans. The yuletide may be upon us, but don't worry. All that "peace on earth, goodwill toward men" stuff won't last long with these criminous flicks on the way!



Ocean's Twelve

You might think master thief Danny Ocean (George Clooney) would retire after making off with more than \$150 million from three Las Vegas casinos. But since the movie about his big score—*Ocean's Eleven*—made off with more than \$180 million from the

U.S. box office, perhaps it was inevitable that he'd be back for another heist. Ocean has a new target this time: European art museums. Yet the roster of friends and foes remains largely the same. Brad Pitt, Matt Damon, Bernie Mac, and several other members of Team Ocean are returning for the sequel, as is love interest Julia Roberts, bad guy Andy Garcia, and director Steven Soderbergh. Elbowing her way into this already crowded all-star lineup is Catherine Zeta-Jones as a cop who complicates Ocean's plans—and Pitt's character's love life. *December 10*

The Woodsman

While the major studios trip over each other trying to offer up the proverbial "feel-good hit of the season," Newmarket Film Group will stick to its bread and butter: a feel-bad film. On Christmas Eve, the company that brought the world the unflinching serial-killer docudrama *Monster* and the blood-soaked martyr-thon *The Passion of the Christ* is releasing *The Woodsman*, the gut-wrenching story of a recently paroled sex offender (Kevin Bacon) struggling to deal with a hostile community, a detective who doesn't trust him (Mos Def), and his own dangerous urges. Viewers at the Sundance and Cannes film festivals were wowed by the performances—and in some cases enraged by the subject matter. A *Wonderful Life* it ain't. *December 24*



Andrew Lloyd Webber's The Phantom of the Opera



Joel Schumacher's an old pro when it comes to whipping fans into a homicidal fury. Comic book lovers are still seething about *Batman & Robin*, the director's disastrously campy 1997 bat-bomb. Now Schumacher's sticking out his tongue at another, very different cult. For legions of swooning theatergoers, Michael Crawford is the Phantom. But when it came time to bring Andrew Lloyd Webber's hit musical to the screen, Schumacher dumped the sixty-something tenor. Instead, hunky young unknown Gerard Butler will don the vengeance-crazed Phantom's eerie white mask. And if Butler can't pull off the tricky role, it won't be his character who's thirsting for revenge anymore—it'll be diehard Michael Crawford fans. *Limited release December 25, national release in January*

The Assassination of Richard Nixon

No, you didn't miss a really big news story. Tricky Dick wasn't assassinated. Yet this psychological thriller is based on real-life events. In 1974, failed businessman turned failed assassin



Samuel Byck (Sean Penn) tried to commandeer a 747 and fly it into the White House. Obviously, he didn't succeed. But the movie isn't concerned so much with Byck's botched hijacking as it is with his descent into madness, prompting film festival audiences to compare *The Assassination of Richard Nixon* to Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*—usually unfavorably. *Limited release*
December 29

White Noise

This paranormal thriller offers answers to two existential questions. Can the dead communicate with the living? And whatever happened to Michael Keaton, anyway? (Where's he been hiding the last few years? The Batcave?) Keaton plays a man who thinks his murdered wife is trying to communicate with him from beyond the grave. Is she pointing a ghostly finger at her killers? Warning her husband that he's next? Or is it all a bizarre hoax? The answers will cost you \$9—more if you want popcorn. *January 7*

The Underclassman

And you thought panty raids were bad. In this crime thriller, the students at an elite private school are running an international car-theft ring. Nick Cannon (*Drumline*'s cocky percussionist) plays a cop who goes undercover as a new student to infiltrate the Ivy League gang. Director Marcos Siega is a veteran of the brief-lived *Fast and the Furious*-lite TV series *Fastlane*, so expect a car chase approximately once every 5.6 minutes. *January 14*

Elektra

After last year's underwhelming Ben Affleck-in-tights vehicle *Daredevil*, moviegoers weren't exactly clamoring for a sequel. Yet 20th Century Fox is giving us one anyway . . . sort of. In this cinematic spinoff, *Daredevil*'s love interest/sparring partner Elektra (*Alias* star Jennifer Garner) strikes out on her own, using her formidable martial arts skills to turn assassin. Naturally, she has a change of heart, and soon she's battling to protect her intended target from a secret society of deadly ninjas. While the plot might sound silly, director Rob Bowman specializes in bringing a dark edge to genre material: He not only directed the *X-Files* movie, he helmed many of the classic show's best episodes. *January 14*

Assault on Precinct 13

Based on a 1976 cult classic directed by a pre-*Halloween* John Carpenter, this action-thriller blows the original off the screen in terms of sheer star power. Carpenter's micro-budgeted indie starred a cast of unknowns, while the remake features a long list

of knowns, including Ethan Hawke, Laurence Fishburne, Gabriel Byrne, John Leguizamo, Brian Dennehy, and *The Sopranos'* Drea de Matteo. But it's the man behind the cameras who'll make all the difference. Carpenter was able to squeeze every last drop of tension from the high-stakes setup: an isolated police station is attacked by an army of murderous thugs; and both the cops and the crooks trapped inside have to fight to survive. Whether little-known French director Jean-François Richet can fill Carpenter's blood-soaked shoes remains to be seen. *January 21*

Constantine

Most hardboiled L.A. private eyes can say they've been to hell and back. But only one can mean it literally: John Constantine (Keanu Reeves).

While other P.I.'s are content to match wits with blackmailers and murderers, Constantine battles ghouls and demons.

His newest case teams him with a cop (*Runaway Jury's* Rachel Weisz) who's investigating her twin sister's death. The police say it was suicide. Constantine suspects [cue ominous music] the forces of eeee-veal. Based on a long-running comic book, the film has been shadowed by dark omens of its own: Alan Moore, the writer who created Constantine, asked the producers to [cue more ominous music] remove his name from the credits. *February 11*



The Interpreter

Sean Penn's mixed up in another assassination plot in this thriller—though this time he's on the other side of the law. Penn plays a federal agent assigned to protect a United Nations interpreter (Nicole Kidman) who overhears plans to kill a foreign dignitary in U.N. headquarters. Given director Sydney Pollack's track record (*Three Days of the Condor*, *Tootsie*, *Out of Africa*, *The Firm*, etc.) and his talented stars, this could be the best genre film of the season—or, failing that, the biggest disappointment. *February*

Already known to AHMM readers for his stories about Indiana detective Larry Erie (as well as wackier fare, such as this issue's "Red Christmas"), journalist Steve Hockensmith has been on the Hollywood beat for more than ten years. His articles about pop culture and the film industry have appeared in *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Cinescape*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and elsewhere.



A GOOD SHOOTING

O'NEIL DE NOUX

The body lay in the street next to a beat-up green Ford Escort, a heavy-set man in a gray T-shirt and jeans, a blue steel semiautomatic pistol lying two feet from his right hand. Detective John Raven Beau, standing in his shirt sleeves on the neutral ground along the center of St. Charles Avenue, loosened his crimson tie with its geometric design that wasn't a geometric design at all. A closer look would reveal the small white circles were actually human skulls. Went with the territory, working Homicide.

Beau waited for a streetcar to pass, tucking his leather-bound notebook under his left arm and watching the curious faces peering out at the crime scene as the green and brown electric car clanked by, heading downtown. Beau at six-two, a lean one-eighty pounds, was thirty. He was a square-jawed man with dark brown hair and light brown eyes beneath a hooded brow. His sharp nose gave him a hawklike appearance. On his right hip sat his 9mm Beretta Model 92-F, snug in its black canvas holster, his gold star-and-crescent New Orleans Police badge clipped to his belt above the left front pocket of his dark blue suit pants.

The crime scene encompassed the uptown-riverside intersection of St. Charles and Burdette Street, including the corner drugstore and the body in the street. Beau's sergeant, Jodie Kintyre, stood alongside the drugstore with a young patrol officer. Jodie, five-seven, a sleek one-ten, wore her yellow-blonde hair in a long pageboy cut. Her dark green skirt-suit brought out the color in her catlike hazel eyes, which she blinked at Beau as he stepped up.

"This is Frank Willard," she said, nodding to the patrol officer whose dark brown face shimmered with perspiration on this typically humid summer afternoon. Willard was twenty-two and stood five-nine, with a thick-bodied wrestler's build.

She gave Beau the rundown in quick sentences. Willard responded to a Signal 64, an armed robbery, at the drugstore and caught the robber on the way out. There was an exchange of gunshots. The robber missed. Willard didn't.

"We have six eyewitnesses inside." Jodie nodded at the drugstore. "Snowood's taking statements. Stay with Willard till the lab's done with him and take him to the Bureau." She tapped Willard on the shoulder. "Don't talk to anyone but me and Detective Beau here until we take your statement."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Call me Sergeant or Detective Kintyre or Jodie, just not ma'am." She hurried off to join the crime scene technician who'd just arrived with his camera and brown evidence case. Beau smiled to himself. At thirty-six, Jodie was getting sensitive when anyone called her *ma'am*, unless it was a little kid.

Willard looked up at Beau and said, "Hope the old woman's gonna be all right."

"Hope you're not talking about Jodie."

"From inside. Behind the counter. Robber pistol-whipped her. Lotta blood."

Jesus!

"What did your sergeant mean, till they're done with me?"

"They'll secure your weapon, then swab your hands for a neutron activation test to determine if you fired a firearm. Perpetrator too. That's it."

Willard leaned back against the brick wall of the drugstore and let out a long breath. He looked so damn young to Beau, who tried reassuring him. "I know what you're going through, man. I've been through it. More than once."

Willard turned his dark brown eyes to Beau and said, "I feel sick."

"Don't throw up on me."

"No, not like that." Willard closed his eyes. "I just feel like . . . jelly inside."

"Not like in the movies, is it? Shoot a man and stand over him making wisecracks. You feel crappy, even when you do it right." Beau watched Willard breathing heavily. "Relax. It looks like a good shooting."

"I don't know how he missed me. Face to face like that." He gasped as if struggling to breathe. "We should teach how to duck and shoot at the range. I was duckin', man."

Beau faced him and said, "Relax. Save it for your statement. Now breathe normally."

Willard nodded and started controlling his breathing. His eyes opened after a minute. "What's your name again?"

"Beau."

"As in John Raven Beau?"

Even rookies heard of me, Beau thought. It wasn't a satisfying thought.

Willard's eyes changed, a recognition maybe, a bonding maybe, standing with John Raven Beau, the half-Sioux, half-Cajun cop who always got his man, one way or the other. Beau was sure Willard thought he'd killed a dozen men at least, when the number was three, exactly. All good shootings. Justifiable homicides, declared by separate grand juries.

A streetcar heading uptown stopped and Beau automatically checked out who came off: a teen girl in white polo shirt and red shorts, a teen boy in green T-shirt and khaki pants, and a redheaded woman, late twenties, wearing blue nurse's scrubs and white tennis shoes. Beau watched her stand motionless, staring at the crime scene as the streetcar pulled away.

She remained frozen in place, just staring at the body in the street.

Beau stepped away from the drugstore and flagged down a passing patrol car. Must have been a slow day in the Second District with all the cop cars passing, drawn to the scene like moths to a light bulb. The cop leaned over and rolled down the passenger-side window so Beau could lean in and ask, "Could you park your unit over there to block the view of the body from the streetcar?"

"Sure," the eager cop said, pulling into the intersection, hitting his blue lights. His name tag read BERTUCCI. Another rookie.

When Beau looked back at the woman in nurse's scrubs, he saw her crossing the street heading straight for him. As she arrived, he could see tears in her eyes. She was about five-five, a hundred pounds. She had a very pretty face. Up close, her hair looked strawberry blonde.

She pointed a shaky hand toward the body and said, "I think that's my husband."

Beau gently took her elbow and led her away from everyone down to the end of the drugstore and had her lean back against the wall. He pulled his portable radio from his back pocket and called Jodie.

"Can you come around the corner?"

Jodie came immediately and Beau moved toward her, keeping a wary eye on the strawberry blonde.

"You have the robber's name yet?"

"We're just going through his wallet now. John Clay."

Beau led the way back to the woman and asked for her husband's name.

"John Clay." She wiped her eyes and Beau could see they were blue ovals.

"Talk to her," Jodie said, returning to the body.

Beau took the woman's elbow again and led her to the high curb and sat her down, sitting next to her, feet in the street, but not far enough to worry about passing cars.

"I'm Detective Beau," he began, letting his voice drop. "It is your husband."

She nodded and sucked in a deep breath. Then she put her head between her knees.

Beau waved to Officer Bertucci. Pulling out a buck he said, "Go in the drugstore and get me a couple Cokes. Make sure they're cold." He glanced back at Willard, who was taking it all in. "You want something to drink?"

Willard shook his head as he watched the strawberry blonde.

"I don't think they're open." Bertucci pointed at the drugstore.

"Then go inside and steal two Cokes. I won't call the police." Bertucci gave Beau the I-know-I'm-a-rookie-and-the-butt-of-another-joke look, until Beau narrowed his eyes and said, "Go!"

As Bertucci entered the store, Jodie came back around and waved Willard to the crime lab technician.

Beau leaned close and asked the robber's wife, "You okay?"

"I'm trying."

"What's your name?"

"Barbara Clay."

He picked up a scent of her perfume now, sweet but not strong. She sat up straight and pulled her hair away from her face, then reached into her small purse for a Kleenex to wipe her face.

"I knew something like this was going to happen."

"Something like what?"

She stood suddenly and Beau got up as Bertucci came out with two cans of Diet Coke, saying that was all they had. She waved hers away but Beau took both.

"The Ford Escort around the corner," Barbara said. "It's ours."

She looked back at Beau and said, "You'll want to come home with me. I have the receipts for his guns."

"Where do you live?"

"Two blocks away."

Beau turned to wave at Jodie and bumped into Bertucci standing there with the dollar in his hand.

"Go back inside and put the dollar next to the cash register."

"Yes, sir." Bertucci bounced away.

Beau waved Jodie over and handed her a Coke.

"Thanks." She popped the cap immediately.

He told her about the Ford Escort and the gun receipts.

Jodie nodded. "Get what you can from her." She raised the Coke but stopped at the deadpan look on Beau's face. "You know what I mean." She poked him in the ribs. "I'll get someone to take Willard's statement."

Beau moved back to Barbara Clay and pointed across the street at his unmarked Chevy Caprice. "Why walk when we can ride?"

"I need to walk," Barbara said as she started to cross St. Charles. Beau went with her. They crossed to the neutral ground, pausing for uptown traffic along the far side of the avenue before crossing to the sidewalk.

Barbara suddenly turned and looked into Beau's eyes. "Did anyone else get hurt?"

"He beat up an elderly woman."

Tears filled her eyes again and she leaned back against the Caprice. Beau waited, notebook under his right arm, Coke in his left hand. He looked around for a passerby who might be thirsty when Barbara reached for the soft drink, popped it open, and took a deep draught. Beau noticed a fresh, purple bruise on her forearm and two older, yellowish bruises above her elbow.

She took a moment to catch her breath, wiping the tears away with her fingers. She raised the soft drink without looking up and said, "Thanks. Really." She pushed off the car, and Beau settled in next to her as they moved down the avenue, passing beneath the wide branches of the oaks, the air musty and smelling like chlorophyll now. The scent was familiar to Beau, who was raised on a small bayou just off Vermilion Bay, in swampy southwest Louisiana.

They turned up Adams Street, crossed to the other side up to Hampson. Barbara dug keys out of her purse and pointed to a two story apartment house.

"In back," she said, guiding him through a fence with no gate, around the side of the wooden building, avoiding air conditioners sticking out of the side windows.

"Watch the stairs," Barbara said, leading the way up a steep wooden staircase that was once painted white. "Don't run your hands on the rail or you'll have splinters for years." It was then

Beau identified her accent. He knew she wasn't from New Orleans the first time she spoke. She sounded Midwestern.

As Beau waited for her to unlock the door, he reached down and rubbed his left knee. And for a moment, he thought of the orthoscopic surgery scheduled the following week to repair the cartilage in his knee.

It was an efficiency apartment, one large room with a double bed in one corner, mismatched dressers on either side, a small entertainment center with a portable TV, and two narrow doors beyond, a closet and a bathroom most likely. The kitchenette stood on the other side of the room.

Barbara put the Coke in the small refrigerator and her purse on a turquoise Formica table. The table had only two chairs; neither matched the other or the table. She moved to the small sink and rinsed out a coffeepot, then reached for a bag of coffee-and-chicory. She put a fresh pot on her Mr. Coffee machine. Beau noticed the place was very clean, smelling of lemon cleaner, curtains fluffed without a hint of dust. The windows sparkled.

Barbara sat in one of the chairs and nodded to the other. Beau sat across from her. She finally looked him in the eye again and said, "He beat up an old woman?"

"Pistol-whipped."

Her shoulders sank and tears welled in her eyes again. She put her face in her hands. After a good cry, she got up for a Kleenex, took two matching mugs from the cupboard, and asked in a hollow voice, "Cream or sugar?"

"Black."

"It's strong."

"That's the way I like it."

She brought the coffee and sat down across from him.

Beau said, "Earlier you said, 'I knew something like this was going to happen.' What did you mean?"

She took in a deep breath. "I should have said something like this was *bound* to happen." She stared into her coffee and explained. Beau took notes as Barbara Clay laid out her life with John Clay in short, weary sentences.

Married two years, Barbara was the sole supporter. John Clay, who had served time in juvenile detention and a ninety-day stint in parish prison for battery, was supposed to be in welding school. Previously he'd taken auto mechanic classes and air-conditioning classes.

"He could be sweet," Barbara said, taking a sip of coffee. "But he had a mean streak." She lifted her arm and looked at the bruises.

"Never hit me, just grabbed and squeezed, and shook me sometimes. When he'd been drinking."

Barbara got up and moved to the sink, opened the cabinet below, and pointed inside. "I hid his first gun in there. Behind the cans of cleaners. He was drunk. When he woke, I told him he came home without the gun." She came back to the table. "It was a Colt. Nine millimeter, I think. I threw it in the river."

She didn't know what he was doing with a gun. He never seemed to have any money and never came home with anything. "I told him if I ever caught him bringing anything stolen here, I was gone." Her face seemed to tighten, and her voice was stronger now.

"I got rid of the gun and he went right out and got a bigger gun. A Smith & Wesson. Forty caliber. He said everyone needs a gun in this city. Said he was going to get me a twenty-two."

She looked into her cup again. "I was going to leave him. Started to time and again, but . . ."

Beau took out a business card and put it on the table. Barbara leaned over and looked at it before stepping back to the kitchen counter and digging two pieces of paper from the silverware drawer. She sat and passed them to Beau. Gun receipts.

"He bought both at gun shows in Kenner. Even waited the five days."

The first receipt, for a Colt 9mm, was dated over a year ago. The second, three months later, for a Smith & Wesson forty caliber. Willard was lucky one of those rounds hadn't hit him.

"Was it a police officer who shot him?"

Beau nodded. "A rookie. Your husband gave him no choice."

Barbara sighed and picked up Beau's card and said, "It's French? Your name?"

"Cajun."

"I thought you were Mexican. Hispanic."

"I get that a lot." Beau's face remained expressionless. "My mother's Oglala Sioux."

Her eyes lit up. "I'm from South Dakota. Sioux Falls."

"My mother's back up there with my grandparents. Pine Ridge Reservation." Beau knew Sioux Falls was on the other side of the state.

A sad smile came to Barbara Clay's lips. "Fancy meeting a Lakota down here."

At least she had the tribe's name right. *Sioux* was the name given to Beau's people by their enemies, like the Pawnee and the Crow and the white man. Actually Beau liked the word Sioux

better. It ran off the tongue with fierceness.

"May I see your driver's license?" Beau asked.

She dug it out of her purse and he copied her pertinent information from it, date of birth, social security number. Her maiden name was Crockett. She looked nice in her photo, nicer than most people. She should smile more often. He passed her license back.

"Where do you work?"

"Charity Hospital M.R.I. Unit."

Beau smiled. "I was in one yesterday." His mind immediately flashed back to the M.R.I. Unit at Ochsner Hospital, him inside the hollow center of a space-age machine, lying very still for twenty minutes, with the machine making loud noises. He remembered all the warning signs lining the walls, signs warning about pacemakers, the danger of magnetizing metal objects brought into the room. He had to leave everything outside the unit, gun, badge, belt buckle, even his ballpoint pen.

"Why were you there?" Barbara asked.

He rubbed his knee and explained about the torn meniscus cartilage, then went on to explain how he'd torn up the other knee at his spring game at L.S.U., sophomore year, and had been unconsciously relying on his left leg so much, he'd torn the cartilage cushion between femur and tibia.

"You're getting it repaired, I hope."

"Next week." He reached into his pocket for a small plastic case and took out two pills.

"Naproxen?"

He nodded as he swallowed the pills with the last of his coffee. He tore out a fresh sheet of notepaper, jotted down the number of the coroner's office, and passed it to her.

"You won't have to physically identify him. Unless you want to. We can match his fingerprints."

She sank back in the chair and looked smaller. He looked down at his notebook as he told her the city would bury him if she didn't have the money.

"I have a burial policy." She got up and went to one of the dressers next to the bed. She rifled through a large folder and came up with several sets of folded papers. "Yes," she said in a relieved voice. "It's right here." She restuffed the folder and started back to him but noticed something with the papers in her hand. She stepped back and pulled out a different set of papers and brought those to the table.

It was a burial policy for five thousand dollars. Barely enough to

bury him. The policy was dated a year ago, shortly after her husband bought his first gun.

"Was your husband home when you left this morning?"

"Sleeping. My shift starts at five thirty."

"Did he tell you what he'd be doing today?"

"He was supposed to be at welding school." She pulled a business card from her purse. The school was in Metairie. She shook her head. "He never told me what he did. Wasn't much of a talker."

And Beau had to wonder why an attractive, intelligent woman like this could marry such a loser? Trying to understand love was an impossibility. Beau's Cajun father told him that long ago, sitting in a pirogue while fishing with his son. "Never even try to figure," his old man said. "De heart go where she wanna to go. Notin' you can do 'bout it. Look at your mama. She too pretty fo' me, too smart and too good."

Beau nodded toward his card, still on the table. "If you think of anything else, call me. Oh, what's your phone number?"

"We don't have one." She asked for his notebook and pen and wrote down her number at work.

He stood and told her he'd be in touch when they were finished processing the Ford Escort and she could pick it up. "Is there anyone who can come be with you?" he asked as he stepped to the doorway.

She shook her head and said she wanted to be alone for a while. She gave him a long stare, and he said she should lock the door behind him. As he moved down the stairs, he heard the latch click. He felt the familiar pain in his knee, but his mind was occupied elsewhere.

She has a burial policy. Odd. Maybe not. Maybe she could see the violence in her husband's eyes.

Jodie was behind her gray metal, government-issue desk in the squad room; Paul Snowood sat in the chair next to it. The crime lab tech stood on the other side next to Beau's desk, which abutted Jodie's. Over by the coffeepot, Frank Willard stood beneath the unofficial logo of the Homicide Division, a vulture perched atop an NOPD gold star-and-crescent badge. His arms folded, he still looked jittery to Beau.

Snowood was explaining, "... It's what we call here in town an open-and-shut case, a 'justifiable homicide.' Willard jumped the dude comin' out and it was Dodge City for a minute." Snowood, six feet tall, two hundred pounds, and over forty, wore another of his cowboy outfits—gold shirt with two rows of buttons, dressy,

brown denim pants, tan cowboy boots. His white Stetson lay atop his desk.

"The dude and Willard drew on each other, like the O.K. Corral. Willard ducked and fired twice, and the dude just plain missed. It's what we call back in the badlands, some good shootin' and some bad shootin'."

Jodie looked like she had a migraine.

Snowood, born and raised across the river in the suburb of Belle Chasse, took the fact he was born on the west bank of the Mississippi so seriously he'd evolved into a turn-of-the-century lawman, straight out of Tombstone. He'd have a handlebar mustache if he could grow a decent one.

Jodie acknowledged Beau with a nod. Snowood turned and grinned his tobacco-laced teeth at Beau and said, "Ah, the Plains warrior has arrived." He raised a white Styrofoam cup to his lips and spit into it.

"How's the woman from the drugstore?" Beau asked.

Jodie said, "She's in stable condition. No fractures. She'll be okay. Eventually."

Atop Beau's cluttered desk lay two semiautomatics, Willard's stainless steel Beretta 9mm, and a blue steel Smith & Wesson forty caliber. The tech picked up the blue steel semiautomatic and wiped the white fingerprint powder from it before dropping the magazine out and pulling back the slide. He had trouble with both.

He dusted the magazine, then carefully flicked out the rounds and dusted them, finding several good partials, which he lifted with plastic tape.

"Our gunman was arrested four times," Snowood said. "Three juvie arrests for shoplifting and simple battery. One adult arrest for simple battery."

"Damn," the technician said, as he struggled to pull back the slide to double check that no round was in the chamber. Making sure the weapon was empty, he pointed it at the top of the row of windows at the far end of the room and pulled the trigger.

"Well, this confirms it," he told Jodie, as he sniffed the barrel of Clay's Smith & Wesson and shook his head. "Got ten rounds here. We only found two casings at the scene. Both from Willard's gun."

Jodie nodded and closed her eyes. John Clay hadn't fired his gun at all. Beau looked over at Willard who was sweating again. Big time.

"Safety's off and it won't fire." The tech shrugged at Jodie. "Gun's malfunctioning."

Willard came over slowly. "Does this mean it's bad for me?"

Jodie shook her head as Snowood said, "Hell no. It's a real gun, and we got enough witnesses said he pointed it at you."

Willard didn't seem convinced, probably because it came from a man who looked like a refugee from Mel Brooks's *Blazing Saddles*.

Jodie sat up and told Willard, "We have five eyewitnesses inside the drugstore saw him beat up the old woman. Three of them watched him go out the front door and point his gun at you; all swear y'all exchanged gunshots. And our sixth eyewitness, from the street, also saw Clay point his gun at you before you fired, and he's a bank president."

Willard wiped the sweat from his face. Jodie opened her hands, palms up, and recited the law verbatim. "R.S. 14:20. A homicide is justifiable when committed in self-defense by one who reasonably believes he is in imminent danger of losing his life or receiving great bodily harm and the killing is necessary to save himself from that danger."

"Sounds like a good shootin' to me," Snowood said.

"It's a good shooting," Jodie confirmed.

Willard turned to Beau, who nodded and told him, "Relax. I'm serious."

Beau leaned his hands on his desk and looked down at the weapons. He went to brush the silver paper clip away from Clay's Smith & Wesson, but it was stuck. He tried pulling it off and it took a real yank to get it off.

"Glue?" Snowood said.

Beau shook his head and put the paper clip next to the Smith & Wesson, which sucked the paper clip to it like a magnet.

Jodie leaned forward. "Maybe the paper clip is magnetized." Beau tried it with Willard's weapon and his stapler but the clip didn't stick to them. He pulled out his stainless steel Parker ballpoint and put it near the gun, and the pen rolled right to it.

"Damn," Jodie said.

"The gun's a friggin' magnet," Snowood declared. "Don't that beat all."

The technician took both weapons, bullets, and magazines down to the crime lab, and Snowood got up to take Willard home. Jodie reminded the rookie she'd see him in the morning at the Superintendent's Hearing.

"Don't worry," she assured him, and started on her paperwork.

As Beau typed up a daily on what he'd learned from Barbara Clay, he told Jodie about the receipts and the burial policy and the

short, unhappy marriage. Finishing the daily, he made two copies. One copy was for his records, the other he put in their lieutenant's IN tray. He passed the original to Jodie.

Sitting back down, Beau closed his eyes and ran through it all again. He came up with the same conclusion he'd come up with as soon as the word *magnet* came from Snowood's mouth.

Jodie stood and pulled the sheet from her typewriter. "Gotta go," she said. He remembered she had a preliminary hearing in criminal court at four P.M. He opened his mouth to tell her what he was thinking, but said nothing.

After she'd left the squad room, Beau went down to the crime lab. Firearms Examiner Peggy Ruffin had the Smith & Wesson completely disassembled and lying on an evidence table. Peggy wasn't the friendliest cop, but she was the best firearms examiner in the city.

"The damnedest thing I've ever seen," she told Beau. He'd never seen her so animated. "This weapon is completely magnetized. You could pull the trigger all day and it wouldn't fire." She pointed at the firing pin. "It's stuck to the side of the channel in the slide. Officer Willard is one lucky man."

Beau felt his heart stammering as he turned to leave.

"Hell," Peggy added, "if we could do this to every criminal's gun, I'd be out of a job."

Beau sat at the top of the stairs and watched the orange glow of the late afternoon sunlight fill the small backyard of Barbara Clay's apartment house. A mockingbird bounced from the branch of a camellia bush and scooped an insect from the grass before flying away, a gray and white streak of feathers. He waited and the mockingbird returned to the bush and perched patiently until it spotted another bug and swooped down to get it.

An hour after he'd arrived, just as twilight was claiming the city, Barbara came around the house and stopped at the bottom of the stairs. Even in the dusk, he could see her eyes widen as she looked up at him. Still in her work clothes, she came up slowly. By the time she was a few feet away, he could see her eyes were wet.

"We have to talk," Beau said, standing and brushing off his pants.

She fumbled with her keys. He could see her breathing heavily now. She led the way in and flipped on the light.

"Let's sit," Beau suggested, sitting across from her at the Formica table.

Barbara brushed her hair away from her face and said in a jittery

voice, "I was at the funeral parlor. You want some coffee?"

"No. But you need to pay attention to what I'm about to say."

She folded her arms in a typical defensive position.

"Whatever you tell me right now is off the record. I'm not advising you of your right to remain silent, so I can't use anything you say against you." He paused a moment to see if his words were registering. Barbara blinked twice and wiped her eyes.

"I know what happened," Beau went on. "You couldn't just throw the gun away again, he'd get another, so you brought it to work. To the M.R.I. Unit. Magnetic Resonance Imaging."

Barbara took in a deep breath, her blue eyes boring into Beau's. Her lower lip quivered, her voice a scratchy whisper. "I couldn't live with myself if he shot someone."

Beau felt the Plains warrior rising inside, and he spoke carefully, his voice void of emotion. "You knew he was up to no good. Knew he was using the gun for criminal endeavors. You didn't believe it was for his protection. Otherwise . . ."

"I wouldn't have incapacitated the gun." Her voice was firmer.

"Exactly. The gun was completely magnetized. Wouldn't fire, but you know that."

The war drums echoed in some racial memory in the back of Beau's mind as he said, "The other insurance policy."

"What other . . ." Barbara looked away.

"The one you put back when you brought out the burial policy."

She looked at him for a long moment, got up slowly, and went back to the dresser and the folder. She pulled out papers and came back, placing them in front of Beau on the table.

There were two policies. Life insurance on John Clay for twenty thousand dollars, Barbara Clay beneficiary. The second policy was on Barbara with Cristina Crockett as beneficiary. Beau pointed to the name and Barbara said it was her mother. He checked the dates on the policies. Both were dated shortly after the burial policy was taken out. He noted that John Clay had signed the policy on him, acknowledging the coverage. She didn't take it out behind his back. No need to get John Clay's signature on the burial policy. She'd taken it out directly with the funeral parlor.

Looking back at the blue eyes, he could see her struggling to keep from crying again. Her voice was barely a whisper. "I didn't do it to kill him."

"I know."

"I didn't want him to hurt anyone," she repeated.

"Even you?" He pointed to her bruises and for an instant felt his father's touch inside. His father would have been more than

sympathetic with this woman; he would have soothed her with his Cajun compassion, probably joking to make her feel better.

But a moment later the warrior rose again in Beau. "You're a smart woman, Barbara. Don't get too smart. We're pretty smart too."

Beau stood up and stretched.

She looked up and asked, "What happens now?"

"Go back home. You've got a second chance at life. Use it well." He looked around the tiny apartment. "Don't carry this around for the rest of your life." He smiled sadly, letting his Cajun side through. "I'm here to tell you it's all right. You didn't put the gun in his hand. You took it out."

He nodded and turned toward the door.

She said, "What about the officer who shot him? Is he going to be okay?"

"Yeah," Beau said as he reached for the knob. "It was a good shooting." 🦅

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EDWIN THE CONFESSOR

BRIAN RICHMOND

If he were one of the superstitious herd he so despised, he'd have called it fate that he, who never watched television, should have it turned on just when they announced the discovery of his wife's body.

He was mounting specimens from a recent trip to Mexico and had the damn thing turned on to the local news station. He planned to go into town later to buy some new hiking boots and wanted to catch the traffic report.

Instead, there it was, the dusty, deserted streets of the Cimmarron Movie Ranch in the desert, south of town. Only this time it was filled with men in hard hats and heavy machinery. The newsreader said, "Highway construction workers at the site of an old movie ranch made a macabre discovery today when digging revealed the remains of a woman . . ."

He picked up the remote control, turned the TV off.

"Shelley, you bitch, you got me in the end . . ."

There were two policemen—he couldn't bring himself to call them cops. One, a thick-bodied Hispanic, leaned against the wall next to the door of the dreary interview room. The other, a skinny, peasant-featured mess of a man named McGrath, sat across the table from Edwin and spoke:

"You need anything? Coffee? Water? A sandwich?"

Edwin shuddered at the thought of a sandwich from this place.

"No, thank you."

"It's no trouble . . ."

"No."



"You don't mind this tape recorder here? We have to tape these things, make sure I'm not slapping you around and stuff." He smiled to show how ridiculous a prospect that was.

"Could you state your name, please?"

"Edwin Oliver David Cunningham. My father was a devotee of Dickens."

"Are you sure he wasn't just a *Happy Days* fan? Heyyyy! Cunninghammmmm!" McGrath made some ridiculous gesture with his thumbs.

"I have come here to confess to murdering my wife. I think I deserve to be treated a little more seriously."

McGrath held up his hands. "You're right. Sorry, okay. Just trying to, you know . . . look, forget it, okay? But, you know, while we're on the subject . . . See, the problem is, any time a body turns up or a murder is reported, we get all, kinds of ah . . . people . . . come here and confess. Hell, Jack the Ripper comes in all the time. He sends us Christmas cards even. So, you know, you waltz in here, say you want to confess, don't even ask for a lawyer present . . ."

"I see no point in a lawyer. I'm not an expert in these things but even I know about DNA testing. You would discover who she was and that I had reported her missing five years ago . . ."

"That is true." McGrath flicked open a cardboard file on the table in front of him. A picture of Shelley stared at the ceiling. Edwin remembered giving it to the police after he had reported her missing. They'd been on one of his field trips in Nevada. He'd been looking for rocks, and for the first couple of days, Shelley had tagged along, but she soon got bored. She spent the rest of the trip sunbathing.

"Nice looking woman . . ." McGrath held the picture up to show it to his companion at the door.

"Too attractive for me, you mean?"

"Hey, no . . ."

"Don't worry, I know we made an unlikely pair. In fact, I counted on it. When I reported her missing I could see your colleagues looking at each other. They were thinking someone like her wouldn't stick around with a . . . a nerd, I suppose is the expression. When I told them I was suspicious that she may have had a lover and that money and valuables were missing from the house, they put two and two together just like I thought they would. She had been in trouble before."

"How'd you two meet up?"

"She helped me change a tire. I'm useless at such things. There

I was, beside the freeway, struggling, macho idiots driving past and shouting insults. She pulled in, changed it for me."

"Now that's my kind of woman. Jesus, you ask my wife . . ."

"Excuse me for interrupting your no doubt fascinating domestic anecdote, but I am trying to give you some background on my murder of my wife. If you don't mind . . ."

"Sorry. That's just me. Running off at the mouth . . ."

"Anyway, we got to talking. I like to think I'm above most of the petty interests of the common herd but, I have to confess, lust remains a problem, especially if you have little experience of women. And from that point of view, Shelley was a dream come true. Lack of experience was certainly not her problem."

McGrath picked up the snapshot again and looked at it. "I gotta tell you, my wife sure don't look nothing like that."

"Each of us wanted the opposite to what we had. She wanted security, respectability, a settled life. Her previous relationships had been with drug addicts, criminals. Though the fact that I am the only offspring of wealthy parents didn't hurt. Me, I was enjoying discovering—shall we say—a more sensual side of my nature . . ."

"Sounds perfect."

"Oh, it was. For a while. Until after we were married. She tried, I'll give her that. Tried to learn, to expand her interests. She gave up drink, drugs. Took care of me. But she was limited. So limited. The more she tried to learn, well, the more those limitations came to the fore. At first it was irritating. Then it was enraging . . ."

"Hey, I can sympathize . . ."

"I doubt it. Time passed and I got so I could hardly stand to see her. She grated on me, like nails scraping a blackboard. And she used the word *totally* all the time. It was totally delicious, she was totally tired, the gas station attendant was totally creepy. Totally totally totally . . . I tried to tell her the effect she was having and she tried to stop. She did. But it was ingrained. One night I'd gone to my den to escape her constant jabbering. I was working on my samples. Did I tell you I'm an amateur geologist? Anyway, in she came and she started. I was totally insensitive to her needs. She was totally committed to our relationship. This had totally gone far enough. Totally totally totally. After I told her! So I picked up my sample hammer, swung it at her head.

"It made this . . . this meaty sound, this thump when it hit her temple. She dropped straight down, straight down. She was dead."

He was looking off into the distance now, seeing the night. "Just like that. Dead.

"I knew the Cimarron Movie Ranch from my trips to the

desert. Knew no one ever went there. So, I took her . . . took the body and buried it there. I drew out some cash, threw some valuables into my bag to dump on my next trip, told the police she'd disappeared. When they looked up her record, her criminal past, well, as I said, they reached the obvious conclusion."

McGrath took another piece of paper from his file, slid it across the table. It was an aerial photo of the movie ranch.

"You dumped the body here, right?"

"I told you."

"Care to show me?"

Cunningham looked down and, without hesitation, pointed to an alleyway running south of the single main street. "There."

There was a long moment of silence.

"What's the matter? Don't you believe me? You must be able to find out it's her!"

McGrath shifted uncomfortably.

"Look, we appreciate you coming in and all . . ."

"What?"

"Things are at an early stage . . . We know where to find you . . ."

"No no no no no. I'm sorry. I've steeled myself for this. Resigned myself. I want this to be over."

McGrath turned to his companion at the door, made a shrugging gesture.

"It's her. I killed her. What more do you want?"

"Go home, Mr. Cunningham. See a doctor. Your wife running off . . . something like that does weird stuff to your head."

"This is outrageous!"

"Like I said, if we need you, we'll call."

McGrath got up.

Cunningham thumped the table.

"No! I will not go home until this thing is cleared up!"

The echo of his shout seemed to hang in the air.

McGrath remained still for a moment. Then he turned and said, "Okay. Look. We've got some problems with your story, okay? There's something doesn't add up . . ."

"How can it not add up, you idiot!"

"Whoa, you are riled." McGrath looked toward his companion. The other officer remained silent, impassive.

"I've got a suggestion. You don't have to do this, it's up to you, okay? You can call a lawyer, whatever . . ."

"For God's sake, what is it?"

"Say we take a drive out there. To the ranch. Go over the scene."

Another man might have hesitated, been reluctant to face the

memories that waited out there in the desert. "Is that all? Then let's get a move on."

It was dusk when they arrived at the ranch. Instead of dreading it, Cunningham was relieved. The entire journey had been filled with McGrath's constant prattling, asking Cunningham if he liked baseball, if he went to the movies. The man was a moron.

The other officer, who was called Jimenez, remained silent throughout.

Now they were pulling into the Cimarron Movie Ranch, driving past the excavations for the new highway project. In the fading pink light, the machines, abandoned for the day, reminded Cunningham of the dinosaurs whose bones he sometimes found among the rocks.

Although it was called a movie ranch, the Cimarron also boasted a false-fronted Western street with saloons, general store, and sheriff's office. Back in the heyday of the B-movie Western, this would have been used as a location. The horses, trained to fall on cue or stand still when the reins were dropped, had been kept in corrals and stables back behind the fake street. The place had been abandoned since the fifties, as much a ghost town as the real settlements it had been built to resemble.

The unmarked police car stopped in the middle of the street and the three of them got out. The night was turning chill.

"Care to show us where you buried her?"

"But you know. You dug her up."

Cunningham strode down the alleyway, eager to get this over, not because he was afraid, but because he wanted to wipe the doubt from that idiot's face.

He stopped.

No excavation work had been done in the alley. The spot where he'd buried her was smooth and undisturbed. The world seemed to tilt crazily. He cast around, tried to find his bearings. . . . This was the place. It was!

"But they found her body . . . the news . . ."

"See, that's your problem, Edwin, you don't watch enough TV." Something about McGrath had changed. The empty-eyed, distracted air had disappeared. He came right over and stood in front of Cunningham. "If you'd have listened to the rest of the report, you'd have heard them saying that the museum people were visiting the site, cordoning it off. That they thought the woman was Native American, buried here maybe a thousand years ago. Some

kind of ritual." He pointed back over his shoulder with his thumb. "They found her back over there, beside the corrals. . . ."

Edwin had rarely been speechless. He was now.

"But don't worry. See, I believe you. Come tomorrow, I'm going to have our crime scene people all over this street. And I know we're going to find her body. And then I'm going to take great pleasure in seeing you go down, you cold-hearted son of a bitch."

Now McGrath's face was right against Edwin's. "Damn you, you talked about killing her like you'd just taken out the trash."

Edwin was frightened. "I want a lawyer now."

"You'll get your lawyer. But I swear to you, you bastard, you'll pay for what you done." McGrath turned away and walked over in the direction of the abandoned corrals where the remains had been found, shouting. "Hey, lady, whoever the hell you were, thank you."

He stalked off towards the car, leaving Edwin in the alley with Jimenez.

"I screwed myself, didn't I?"

For the first time that day, Jimenez spoke.

"Totally," he said. ↗

THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

by Willie Rose

Each letter consistently represents another. The quotation is from a short mystery story. Arranging the answer letters in alphabetical order gives a clue to the title of the story.

FU XDT EI XEP FOWIOUIC UEDU XSFUFOM, XEFNE
XPVKC QD TT DT D NEFKC T TNSDXK VOKITT ZPV HVTU
EDQQIOIC UP EDWI UEI JIZ UP FU.

—DSUEVS NPODO CPZKI

CIPHER:

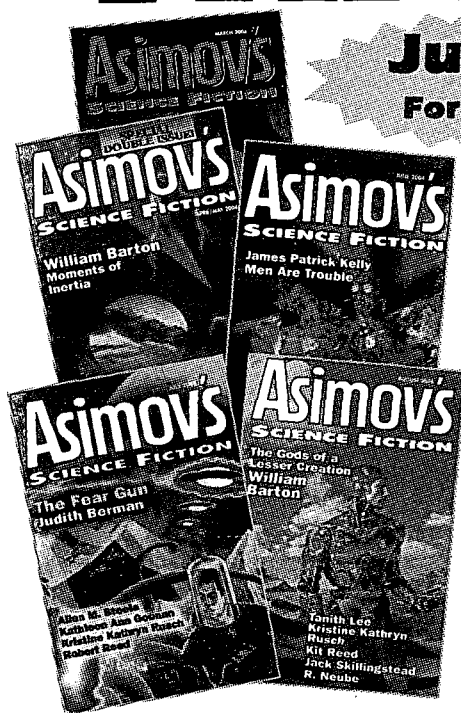
ANSWER: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Solution on page 185

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TWO BIRDS WITH ONE STONE

JEREMIAH HEALY

I.

The punk rock receptionist in the suite of law offices had scored another piercing since I'd seen her last. The new ornament was a stainless steel stud beneath her lower lip, and when she spoke into the little wand of a microphone attached to her headset, I had the disorienting sensation of watching a plastic Wiffle bat try to hit a silver baseball.

As I glanced out the window behind her toward Steven Rothenberg's late October view of the Boston Common, the receptionist said to me, "Steve's available now."

"Keep your seat. I know the way."

Down the short hallway, Rothenberg's door was open. Inside the office, a suit jacket hung from a coat tree, and his tie was tugged down below that prominent Adam's apple. His hair wasn't so prominent anymore, but the beard did what it could to make up for it.

Rothenberg stood from behind a cluttered desk. "John Francis Cuddy," the right hand coming toward me, "Good to see you again."

We shook, and I released my grip. "Bad sign, Steve."

"I'm sorry?"

I dropped into one of the two client chairs in front of him. "Your wanting to shake hands with me. It tells my cynical side that this is a bad one."

Rothenberg sat back down. "I'll have to watch that."

Since the criminal defense attorney had asked the private investigator to come over, I waited him out.

Rothenberg sighed and lifted a manila file from the corner of his desk.

"I got appointed on *Commonwealth v. Tinch*."

Unusual enough name, it stuck with you. "The rape case out of Calem?"

"Alleged rape. Fourteen-year-old daughter of a conservative, incumbent state senator and a respected superior court judge. Eighteen-year-old defendant, so he's going as an adult."

The newscasts didn't reveal the girl's name, but the family was too well known for it not to be common knowledge. "Lisabeth Hamilton."

A nod. "Ms. Hamilton claims that she was attacked two months ago, but reported the incident just last week."

It didn't take a genius. "When Ms. Hamilton discovered she was pregnant."

"Right on the button. Her statement to the police reads that the attack occurred as she was walking home from school just after classes began. She's 'certain' it was an African-American, though he wore a mask."

"A mask, but not gloves?"

"Correct, hence she saw his hands. And Ms. Hamilton also claims she didn't recognize her attacker, despite knowing Devonne Tinch from said school."

"I thought the papers said Tinch lived in Dorchester?"

"He does. METCO student."

A program that bussed promising kids from Boston's inner-city neighborhoods like Dorchester to supposedly better "metropolitan" schools like Calem's. "Steve, if the incident happened during the first week or so of classes, how sure are we that Ms. Hamilton would have met your client already?"

"He started last semester, struggled with his studies, and therefore repeated a year."

I felt myself nodding. "Making the four-year age difference functionally three."

"More like two, John. Ms. Hamilton skipped a year herself."

"Okay, so the victim says she didn't recognize the attacker, even though she actually knew him for eight or nine months."

Rothenberg leaned back in his swivel chair. "And even though Mr. Tinch is three inches taller and twenty pounds lighter than the description Ms. Hamilton gave to the police."

"Steve, that could be just the stress of the situation." I tried to recall the news report's details. "Didn't your client get nailed by a DNA match on semen from the victim's clothes?"

"Yes." Rothenberg came forward now, frowning as he leafed through the file. "My client was arrested in the current case three days ago because his specimen went into the Registry's

database from a plea three years ago."

"Rape also?"

"No. Indecent assault."

"Which sounds an awful lot like rape bargained down to a lesser charge. And maybe a pattern of conduct on your client's part."

Rothenberg closed the file. "He didn't wear a mask three years ago."

"So he's learning from his past mistakes. And he necessarily would have known the Hamilton girl could recognize him."

Rothenberg sighed, then slumped back into his chair again. "You know what drives me nuts, John?"

"Private investigators?"

"Innocent clients. The guilty ones, I make the system work for them the best I can, but I can also sleep nights, knowing that something I didn't think of never got the wrong guy put in jail. On this baby, though . . ."

"Steve, they've got a DNA match, so unless this Tinch has a twin brother—"

"Just an older one, I think—"

"—I don't see there's much I can do for you."

Rothenberg pursed his lips, then gave a judicious nod. "Tell you what, John. On my dime, go see Devonne Tinch, give me your take on him."

"Steve . . ."

"Please." Rothenberg waved his hand over the file as though administering a blessing. "The paperwork reads right for him as the guy, but the kid's attitude just doesn't *feel* right for it."

I dropped my head, then looked back up. "Is Tinch in Middlesex, then?"

The so-called "new" Middlesex County Courthouse and Jail had been open for about thirty years now, and the building's furnishings were starting to show it. I sat in a little conference room with glass walls across a scarred and scorched tabletop from a slim, intense young black male with a shaved head and a face like a camp hatchet. A corrections officer stood outside the room, watching for security reasons but not listening in on us.

Devonne Tinch stared through me as he spoke. "I did *not* rape that bitch."

I clasped my hands on the table. "Looks like we have to start with a vocabulary lesson, Devonne. Ms. Hamilton is either the 'victim,' or the 'accuser,' or just the 'complaining witness.'"

"Now you sound like a cop."

"I was. Military Police, but a long time ago."

"Army, huh?" Tinch stood down a bit. "I was thinking about joining the army too. Get that scholarship program for college."

"Let's think about more current events, like your version of what happened."

A flare from the eyes. "My *version* is that nothing happened."

"Then where were you on the afternoon Ms. Hamilton claims she was attacked?"

"How should I know, man? That was two months ago, and my lawyer says even Lissy's not dead sure which day it was."

Lissy. "Can you remember back three years, then?"

Tinch blew out a breath smelling of "mystery meat," a jailhouse staple.

"I was just a kid—fifteen years old. The bit—the *victim* was twenty-five, gave me liquor, saying her old man wasn't treating her right, then she starts touching and feeling me up. Next thing I know, we're going at it, not even using a condom or nothing—hell, I could of caught a *disease*. Then her old man comes through the door, and she's screaming rape."

"The conviction still stands."

"I wasn't convicted. I plea-bargained it, on account I was a juvie, and they said that meant the record'd be sealed up. Only now it turns out they can *unseal* the DNA stuff."

"You tell the good folks at the METCO program about your juvenile record?"

"You out of your mind? I'm a black student with decent grades in a crappy school, and I got the chance to attend an A-plus school in Calem that might get me on to college. What would you do?"

"I was never in the position."

Tinch grunted out a derisive laugh and waved his hand behind him, toward the cells. "Yeah, well, this here's my 'position.' And it's gonna be, till you and Rothenberg figure out a way to prove I didn't rape that girl."

"Did you ever have consensual sex with her?"

"No, man. Never, not once."

"Then how do you account for your DNA being on her clothes?"

A cruel, wise smile. "Same way Johnnie Cochran accounted for it in O. J.'s case. I was framed."

"If that's your best argument, Devonne . . ."

Tinch held his hands up shoulder high, as in a double stop sign. "Look, I *knew* Lissy Hamilton. Plus, my girlfriend Gloria and her go back to grammar school together." Tinch looked around, then

hunched forward, maybe being sure the corrections officer outside the glass wall couldn't read his lips. "I'm gonna attack somebody who can identify me *and* is best buds with my own girl? Come on, man, there's lots of easier ways."

I was beginning to see what Steve Rothenberg meant by Tinch not "feeling" right for the crime. "Does Gloria have a last name?"

"Yeah. Carson."

Time to change tacks. "Any chance your older brother could help us here?"

"Maurice?" A streak of what I took to be genuine sadness crossed Devonne Tinch's features. "No, man. Maurice and me, we don't get along so good."

Five minutes later I'd recovered my cell phone from the security pod on the citizen side of the bars. Then I called Steve Rothenberg to tell him I'd give it a day. Or two.

I hadn't been out to Calem for a while, and driving through the town center reminded me of why I never much liked it. Too clean, too cute, too aware of itself as a picture-perfect place to live. I tried to imagine the battle some poor school administrator had to have fought to get METCO kids like Devonne Tinch out to paradise.

I found a parking place on the street just down from the police station itself, but when I asked the civilian behind the inside counter for the one detective I knew there, she said he was on vacation. Then I mentioned Devonne Tinch and got a rotten egg scowl from the civilian, who asked to see my ID before calling "upstairs."

The officer who came out a door to a short staircase was fortyish and plump, with an hospitable smile on her face. A generation before, she'd have modeled as a homemaker baking sugar cookies and pouring large glasses of milk.

"John Cuddy?"

"That's me."

"Aphrodite Smith."

I tried not to cringe, but Smith caught something. "My parents figured that with a plain last name, I'd need an exotic first one to spur me on to beauty and grace. Nice game plan, just didn't work."

I was beginning to like her. "I gather you're the detective on the *Tinch* case?"

"Sergeant Detective. Like the Boston force, we do rank first, duty second."

"There somewhere we can talk?"

"Follow me."

Smith entered a small interrogation area with the square footage of a walk-in closet. Table, chairs, one-way mirror on the wall. If there were four of us instead of two, you'd picture that stateroom scene from one of the Marx Brothers' movies.

We sat, she examined my ID a little more thoroughly than the civilian had, then handed it back to me.

"You're the visitor, Mr. Cuddy."

"I've been asked by Mr. Tinch's lawyer to investigate Lisabeth Hamilton's complaint of rape against him."

Elbows came onto table, chins in palms of hands. "First ground rule: I do not say the name of the complaining witness."

"Fair enough. Does the witness have an explanation for why she waited two months to report the supposed attack?"

A disappointed look. "Mr. Cuddy, I hope you're neither that stupid nor that disingenuous."

"Ms. Hamilton reported the 'rape' only after she realized she was pregnant."

"Girls that age have irregular periods, and they're often late."

"A reason why Ms. Hamilton might not be sure she was pregnant, but not a reason why she wouldn't be sure she'd been raped."

"Mr. Cuddy, certainly you know how difficult it can be for any victim of violence to pursue it formally. In this case, the witness did not believe she recognized her attacker, so there was no one to accuse. And she wasn't even aware of the DNA Registry being in existence."

"Lucky thing, then, that she came forward even when she did."

Smith paused, then rolled her head on her shoulders. "She was a frightened little girl, Mr. Cuddy. After being attacked, she took off her clothes and bathed, as anyone might under the circumstances."

"She washed herself, but not her clothes."

"That's right."

"Didn't throw them away, either."

"As stated in my report, which I'm sure Mr. Rothenberg has shown you, the witness placed her clothes from the incident in a plastic bag."

First shades of the O. J. case, and now Monica's. "You're comfortable with a DNA match based on two-month-old stains and three-year-old database samples?"

"The techies are, so I am too." Smith lowered her voice, made it a little chilly. "For God's sake, they're exonerating convicted inmates left and right on matches—or failures to match—that go back two *decades*."

"Did you test Mr. Tinch's older brother, Maurice?"

"We requested he provide a sample, but Maurice Tinch declined, as he has every right to."

"Won't a jury wonder about that, though?"

"Not my department." Smith spread her hands on the tabletop and dropped her voice another five degrees. "Look, Mr. Cuddy, Calem is a good town. I grew up here, and when the METCO program was struggling to get off the ground, people like Grant and Willa Hamilton argued in *favor* of bringing kids like Devonne Tinch into our public schools, to which the Hamiltons send their own children. Through the years, ninety-five, even ninety-nine percent of these METCO kids have been fine, but every once in a while, things go haywire, probably something from when they were younger and a kind of flashback hits them. And then they commit an incredibly stupid crime."

When Smith seemed to be finished, I said, "Given that it was a rape, why not just have an abortion? Quietly."

A sigh. "Mr. Cuddy, in this commonwealth, any child under sixteen must have a parent's permission to have an abortion, or she has to go before a trial judge to get a court order."

I considered that. "Difficult path to follow for the daughter of a judge and a conservative state politician."

"That's not the worst of it." Smith seemed to warm up a little. "I've known girls—like the victim here—try so-called 'home' remedies. Jumping rope for twenty hours straight to induce a miscarriage. Eating Twinkies and drinking Dr Pepper."

"Has Ms. Hamilton had an abortion as yet?"

"Quite frankly, none of my business, and certainly none of yours."

Smith rose from her chair. "We've crossed every *t* and dotted every *i* on this one, Mr. Cuddy. Now, is there anything else?"

Given the current temperature of Sergeant Detective Aphrodite Smith's voice, I decided not to ask what time high school let out these days.

II.

I really felt like a ghost from history. Not only did the kids milling and strolling and acting out seem about twelve years old, but the campus and its buildings looked more like a private college than a public high school, even in a town as ritzy as Calem.

One pair of kids stood out a little, though. Maybe because they were arguing, and the others gave them a wide berth.

The first girl was about five-five and blonde, wearing a short

skirt and boots out of a Frankenstein movie that kicked her height up another four inches. The second girl was olive-skinned, with brown hair streaked blonde, in a tank top and sweatpants with little strings at the bottom for tying. Probably in some fashion statement, the strings were untied and flopped around her sneakers as she shifted from one cocked hip to the other.

When I heard the second girl start a sentence with "Lissy, don't be a bitch about this," I figured I might have found Ms. Hamilton.

Then the second girl stomped off, nearly tripping on those untied strings at the bottom of her sweats.

I said, "Lisabeth Hamilton?"

She turned, awkwardly, given the boots. "Yeah?"

"I thought I was going to see a boxing match break out."

Hamilton did a dry spit in the direction of the departed girl. "Well, like, her boyfriend raped me, so Gloria and I aren't exactly on the best of terms anymore."

Not exactly the "frightened" young woman Aphrodite Smith had described either. "I could see that three days ago, when Devonne Tinch was arrested, but now?"

"Yeah, well, I'm on meds, you know? Help me, like, handle the stress."

Which made no sense to me as an answer, but then, if she were on drugs, it might explain both her attitude and the non sequitur.

"I wonder if I could ask you a few questions?"

Baby doll pout. "You're a cop, let's see a badge."

I opened my ID holder.

Hamilton just glanced at it. "Oh, that is so lame. You're a private eye working for that monster?"

"Trying to make sure an innocent man doesn't—"

"Hey," from over my left shoulder, "what's going on?"

Hamilton glanced that way, then belted out, "Trevor, this asshole was just leaving."

I turned to see three guys, looking very football, walking in stride with each other. The one in the center seemed to be the leader, with a Mohawk cut and a quarterback's build. The other two were shorter and heavier, kind of second-string offensive guards, though they affected the same hairdo.

Quarterback said, "You're leaving, asshole."

"Perhaps not just yet, Trevor."

He grabbed me by the lapel of my suit jacket. I let him pull me toward him, then stepped aside and did a sweep kick, taking his feet out from under him. He landed with a very satisfying "whoosh" sound gushing from his lungs.

"Hey," said one of his friends, facial features tightening but his body language making no attempt to back it up, "you can't leg-whip somebody. That's against the rules."

"Let's hope a rule is all I break."

Again from behind me, I heard something, but more a car gunning its engine than a voice, though I thought I caught the word "Lissy" shouted over the noise.

The car turned out to be a Lincoln Navigator, roughly the size of a Navy destroyer. A bearish guy who looked just like he did on television broadcasts from the statehouse steps stormed out of the S.U.V., and a kid who could have been Lisabeth's younger brother slipped from the passenger's side.

Grant Hamilton strode mightily toward us as Trevor, still on the ground, coughed and gurgled a little. "What are you doing with my daughter?"

I glanced toward the young lady in distress, tending to her fallen knight, and I tried to take the sensibilities of her younger brother into account. "Asking questions about some accusations against Devonne Tinch."

Lisabeth turned to her father. "He's a private eye, working for that . . . boy."

Daddy's jaw jutted out like Gibraltar. "I have a re-election campaign to run, and we have nothing to say to you."

"Fine, but I was just assaulted by—what, your daughter's boyfriend?"

Grant Hamilton whipped out a cell phone. "I'm calling the police."

Time to bluff. "Just came from there, actually. But it's a nice department, and Sergeant Detective Smith is a sweetie. On the other hand, we could just go to your house, straighten this out, before the media gets a hold of it and blows it way out of proportion. In front of your electorate."

Daddy fumed, but instead of 911, he hit a speed dial and announced that everybody would be home in fifteen minutes. With a guest.

"Home" turned out to be a garrison colonial on about three acres. I parked at the curb, since the driveway was dominated by a Mercedes sports coupe and the Navigator, which had been barreling ahead of me for the past ten minutes. Grant Hamilton exited the driver's side, his son the passenger's. Lisabeth had chosen—stamping her feet—to stay by the side of boyfriend Trevor back at the high school.

Hamilton himself ushered me through a living room to a family one that had various placards on stakes, with legends reading HAMILTON: INCUMBENT, TRUSTWORTHY; THE RIGHT TO LIFE; and MANDATORY SENTENCING MAKES SENSE, just in case you had some doubt about where "the incumbent" stood on such issues with elections coming up early the next month. Then he bellowed out a "Willa" while I descended three beautifully tiled steps toward a daybed next to a door that, from its window panels, gave onto the attached garage. By the time I'd turned around, the young son had disappeared and the wife had replaced him in the room, moving with that almost athletic grace authority seems to give certain people, in this case a superior court judge still on the law-school side of fifty, wearing a business suit.

"Willa," said Hamilton, "this man is a private investigator working for that Tinch bastard."

I thought Mrs. Hamilton might flinch, but instead she smiled, as though used to such introductions. "And does this private investigator have a name?"

"John Cuddy," I said, taking a seat in the middle of the daybed.

"Mr. Cuddy, Willa Hamilton."

She lowered herself into an easy chair the way a ballerina might. Her husband stayed standing.

I addressed the judge. "I know this is difficult for you."

"You know nothing," said Her Honor, pleasantly enough.

Okay. "Your Lisabeth claims to have been raped two months ago, yet she reported it only last week. Did she tell you sooner?"

"We decline to answer." Again, pleasantly.

"Judge, I don't think that'll be an acceptable response in a courtroom."

Now a pleasant smile. "We're not *in* a courtroom, sir."

"I just saw your daughter having an argument with her close friend, Gloria Carson."

"Good family and a fine girl."

I noticed the order of the compliments as Daddy chimed in with, "Until she took up with that ghetto scum."

I began to get the feeling that it was mostly Mrs. Hamilton who had advocated for the METCO program to come into Calem. Looking from one parent to the other, I said, "Are you going to give your permission for an abortion?"

Grant Hamilton's face actually went purple. "Our daughter was raped! Of course—"

Mom said simply, "Grant?" in that same pleasant tone, but it shut him up like he'd been slapped.

I decided I was glad I'd never dated a judge.

Then Mrs. Hamilton made a graceful gesture with her right hand.

"Darling, I believe it's your turn to drive Kenny and his friends to their soccer game."

Daddy said, "Yes, it is," then bellowed out a "Kenny, let's go," before heading toward the door that opened onto the garage.

I stayed with his wife. "Where do Gloria and her good family live?"

On his way, the senator stopped at a telephone table. He grabbed a White Pages and slung it at me, the book fluttering like a shot duck on the way down.

Grant Hamilton said, "Take it with you as you leave."

When I got back into my car, I searched for Gloria's last name. No "Carson" listed for the town of Calem.

Figured. A cellular moment.

I dialed a friend at the Department of Revenue, the commonwealth's tax arm. He gave me a hard time, but on my fourth "Bernie, it's just an address," he gave me that, too.

III.

"Gloria is not here, and you are not to see her anywhere."

The woman who opened the front door bore a striking resemblance to her daughter, who would age awfully well if the gene pool somehow held its sway over American fast food.

The woman's slight Spanish accent led me to say, "Mrs. Carson, may I ask where you're from originally?"

"Cuba. Now, please go."

"Mrs.—"

"I have been in this country as many years as the Castro refugees were when we Marielitos arrived here, thanks to your President Carter and our 'beloved' Fidel. I know my rights of citizenship, and among them is the one not to talk with you."

The door closed.

Maurice Tinch wasn't at home when I knocked on the door of the three-decker in Dorchester, a neighborhood that functioned pretty well as a mixing pot—if not a melting pot—of Irish-, Greek-, and African-Americans. However, a neighbor tending her window boxes told me he'd likely as not be at the tavern down the block.

And he was, corner stool, using the nail of an index finger to

peel the label off an empty bottle of Miller High Life. Tinch seemed to take great pride in his work.

The place was nearly empty, smelling of stale beer and urine, the linoleum tacky to the soles of my shoes as I walked over to him. Like the Carson mother and daughter, Devonne's brother and he bore a striking resemblance to each other.

But, best to be sure. "Maurice Tinch?"

He didn't look up from his peeling operation. "Depends on who be doing the asking."

I took the next stool. "You ready for another one of those?"

"Now that's the kind of question I been waiting on."

I made a circling peace sign to the bartender, and when our beers arrived, Tinch drew about half his bottle before setting it back down.

I said, "Thirsty today?"

A shrug. "Man wants to buy me a drink, could be he'll buy me another when this one here's gone."

"Could be." I took out my ID holder. "I'm a private investigator, trying to help your brother."

"Devonne?" Now a harsh laugh, Tinch never even glancing at my license.

"Man, nobody can help that boy."

"What makes you so sure?"

Another few ounces of High Life took its next to last trip. "Devonne, he don't just want to not be from here. He want to forget he ever *was* from here."

I couldn't guess why. "And that's why nobody can help him?"

"Devonne, he got himself into this, going out to that nice suburban town, and its nice school, learn all that fancy stuff like math and science. Well, it seem to me science is what sunk the boy."

"I understand you declined to have your DNA tested."

"Damned straight. Look what it done for my little brother."

"You know any of his friends from Calem?"

The fingernail scraped a mite harder against the clear glass. "Devonne, he never did like to bring his friends to our apartment down the street. He showed me a picture once, though, somebody took of them all standing together. Devonne and his squeeze name of Gloria, that Hamilton fox the police say he raped, and the fox's boyfriend, the quarterback or some such on the football team, probably wear helmets made from gold. Well, you look at that picture, man, and what do you see?"

"You tell me."

"Devonne, he look like a turd next to three slices of Wonder bread."

"And you never met any of the three?"

"Uh-uh. Like I said to you, Devonne, he don't want his fine friends meeting his worthless brother."

Tinch downed the last of the beer. "How's about a refill?"

I slid the one I hadn't touched over to Maurice Tinch and wished the man a nice day.

Which it was. A nice day, that is, at least for late October.

And after spending time with the people I had earlier, a little cleansing ceremony seemed appropriate.

The flowers on the next grave in the row overlooking Boston Harbor had wilted badly, but not having put them there, I didn't feel right moving them either. So instead I split my bouquet in two and knelt down, covering the long-dead flowers with some recently dead ones.

John, John. Always the best kid on the block.

I looked at her headstone. ELIZABETH MARY DEVLIN CUDDY. "Beth, I haven't been 'on the block' for a long time now."

Doesn't matter. You always will be.

The remark reminded me of something Maurice Tinch had told me about his brother, and therefore I shared the lowlights of the case so far with my one and only wife.

But doesn't the DNA evidence mean it has to be your client?

"Sure seems that way. But like Steve Rothenberg said, the kid doesn't feel right for it."

I wouldn't want to bet on a jury "feeling" that way too.

I was about to tell her I agreed when my cell phone danced a little jig in my jacket pocket. I took it out, and the yellow window display showed in green letters the abbreviation in my "address book" for the Law Offices of Steven Rothenberg, Esq.

IV.

It was nearly dark by the time I arrived at the location his punk rock receptionist had given me, so the State Police Crime Lab Unit had klieg lights up in the copse of majestic oak trees, giving a theatrical flair to the otherwise carnival-like atmosphere of spinning and flashing lights of the official vehicles, including the blue-and-white bubbles atop the medical examiner's minivan.

Wending my way through the rubbernecks, I asked a young Calem uniform for Sergeant Detective Aphrodite Smith. He said she was consulting with a statie detective and couldn't be dis-

turbed. I told him she'd called a lawyer looking for me, and he told me to follow him.

As we entered the wood line, I could hear the buzzing of the evening flies thirty feet before we reached the cordoned area around the body. Techies were inside the yellow tape, Smith and a former fullback in a business suit just outside, notebooks out and pens in hand. The fullback began asking a long question of one techie as I reached Smith and she looked up at me.

"Recognize the decedent?"

I willed my eyes to go to the body, still in its tank top and sweat-pants with the untied strings. "I never met this young woman, but I saw her on your high school campus around two thirty P.M. I believe that's Gloria Carson."

"As in girlfriend of Devonne Tinch?"

"Yes. I saw Gloria's mother about half an hour later, at the Carson house, but she wouldn't let me inside."

Smith motioned toward the body. "Joggers found her. Popular place after five, but pretty much empty earlier in the day."

I looked down again. "That's a pretty nasty head wound for so little blood here."

"Agreed. Preliminary is fractured skull, but done elsewhere."

"One silver lining."

Smith looked at me like we were playing poker. "I'd love to hear it."

"My client's in jail."

"Meaning, it couldn't have been him."

"That's right."

"His brother isn't."

I was about to tell Smith I didn't think Maurice "High Life" Tinch would be in any shape to make his way to Calem when I heard what sounded like Mrs. Carson's voice, crying out her daughter's name.

Desperately.

Smith squeezed her eyes shut. "Cuddy, you seen *Mystic River* yet?"

I knew what she meant. "No, but I've read the book."

Sergeant Detective Aphrodite Smith closed her notebook and began to walk toward Mrs. Carson's voice. "Well, now we both get to act in the play."

"My husband is away on his business in New York City." Mrs. Carson swiped a handkerchief across her nose, then brought it against her eyes. "I must telephone to him."

Since I knew the poor woman, even just slightly, Smith asked me to stay as we waited in the Carsons' darkened living room for a neighbor to drop off her own child with another family and come to comfort the bereaved.

Smith said, "We believe your daughter was killed somewhere else and then moved to the park. Mr. Cuddy here saw her with Lisabeth Hamilton just after classes ended today. Do you have any idea where Gloria might have gone from the high school?"

"No." The hankie came down to half-mast. "She did not come home yet, but that is not unusual. Even after Devonne—her . . ." Mrs. Carson seemed to leave us for a moment. Then, "In Cuba, when I am very young, there was a man from Holland. He tells me once the story of the stork. The way I believe him, little babies come from eggs, like the birds. For years I would see a shell on the ground, broken, and I would smile, even to look up at the sky, because for me, it meant a new life had just begun itself."

The hankie covered Mrs. Carson's eyes again. "Only now somebody has killed my little bird, and Gloria is gone from my sky forever."

Aphrodite Smith looked over at me now, and I decided I was also glad I'd never dated a police detective.

Given the head start I had on Maurice Tinch's likely whereabouts, I found him in the nearby tavern before the unmarked sedan parked in front of his three-decker began a canvas of the neighborhood.

Still on the corner stool, Tinch caught me coming into the bar. He'd just about finished peeling the label off the fifth of five empty bottles of High Life. You could bet he'd finished the beer itself long before.

"The man who likes to buy me beer."

I took the next stool again, but waved off the approaching bartender.

"You do that with every bottle you drink?"

"The way I pace myself. I don't drink the next one until I finish scraping off the last."

"You been pacing yourself here since I saw you?"

"Uh-oh." He stopped his fingernail and actually engaged my eyes. "Now that sound to me like a police question."

"It soon will be. Gloria Carson, Devonne's girlfriend, was killed out in Calem sometime this afternoon."

"Well, well." A shake of the head as he doubled his efforts on the label. "Seem like that town just bad luck for everybody, don't it?"

I glanced toward the beer cooler. "Our bartender be willing to alibi you?"

"Like they call it in the movies, I am iron-clad. Been sitting here since twelve noon, and I left my fine stool only to go to the Men's. And Devonne, he in jail, so he be free on this one too."

"Any ideas who might not be?"

"Like I say before, Devonne never bring any of his 'society' friends around. Besides, I think he like it fine, visiting his girlfriend's house out there. Her daddy travel a lot, her momma got to go to the store and such. Privacy, if you catch onto my drift."

"Your brother and Gloria Carson made love in her parents' house?"

"Wouldn't be up to our bloodline if he didn't." Maurice Tinch finished with the label. "My, my, what do you know? Looks like you come just in the nick of time."

V.

"Any good news?"

From the way Devonne Tinch toned his voice in the jail's little conference room, I didn't think he'd yet heard about Gloria Carson.

There is no easy way to tell someone that kind of bad news, so I decided to go for shock value in the hope of opening him up.

"Devonne, Gloria's dead."

His hard eyes bore into me. "Say what?"

"Somebody caved in her skull, then dumped her body in a public park under some trees."

Tinch came out of his chair, fists curled, but more to pound my chest than punch. I clamped my hands around his wrists, and shook my head in an emphatic "no" to the guard stationed outside the glass walls.

Tinch shuddered once, twice, then just seemed to collapse inside himself, dropping back into his chair nearly hard enough to break it.

I waited a moment before, "Devonne?"

He brought his palms up to his face. "Who would want to kill Gloria?"

"Your brother told me you visited her out in Calem."

"Of course I did. That's where she lives . . . lived."

"At her house. When her parents weren't home."

Tinch snapped up at me, his hands slapping the tabletop in front of him. "You mean, did I do the deed with her? Oh, sure, man. I nailed every damned white girl in the whole damned town."

"Devonne, stay with me on this. It's important."

A sullen expression. "What is?"

"You remember telling me about the incident three years ago, with the older woman?"

"Yeah. So?"

"Did you ever mention it to Gloria?"

"Man, that'd be crazier than me telling the METCO people about it."

"You also said something like, 'I didn't even wear a condom. I could have gotten a disease.' "

"Like I told you. But what does that have—"

"When Gloria and you made love, did you use a condom?"

"Of course we did. You think I didn't learn my lesson?" Tinch closed his eyes and hung his head. "We even made a little game out of it, her putting the thing on me and then her taking it off again afterwards."

"And Gloria was friends with Lisabeth Hamilton since grade school, right."

"So?"

"So where do you suppose Lisabeth got a sample of your semen to put on her clothes?"

Devonne Tinch opened his eyes, and his mouth too, though no words came out.

More of a wail.

On my drive back out to Calem, the radio news broadcast closed its coverage of Gloria Carson's murder with an announcement that the town's high school would be closed for the following two days, except that grief counselors would be available "as usual" for any students wanting to talk about their friend and classmate's death. As I turned onto the right street, I turned off the radio, thinking that it would have been unthinkable during my teenaged years for there to be a standard protocol for dealing with a student's sudden, violent death.

The big Lincoln Navigator roared out of its driveway, the garage door opened behind it to show the Mercedes coupe still there. Because of the window tinting on the S.U.V., I couldn't see who was in it, but the driver sped the car down the street the way Grant Hamilton had led me to his home earlier that day.

I parked at the curb again and walked up to the Hamiltons' front door.

I knocked, first softly, then really pounding. Nobody responded.

I went into the garage, and the door from it onto the family room was unlocked. I walked quietly until I could hear muffled

crying from upstairs. I climbed the steps, staying to the inside edge of each to minimize any squeaking.

And to notice that two people were crying behind separate closed doors.

I picked the one that sounded more like a fourteen-year-old girl.

After knocking and hearing a "Go away," from behind the paneled wood, I tried the handle. Unlocked, also. I eased the door open.

Inside the room, Lisabeth Hamilton was lying prone diagonally across her bed, crying into a pillow she'd scrunched under her face. There was some kind of video playing on the computer screen in a hutch next to the bed, a frilly reading chair beside the hutch.

Given the thick wall-to-wall carpeting, I didn't think she'd heard me walk in. "Lisabeth?"

She abruptly rose up onto knees and elbows, swinging her face around to glare at me through the tears. "What are you doing in my house?"

"I know what you and Gloria did, and I even know why."

Hamilton went back to her pillow. "Get *out* of here."

"But you have to tell me who killed her and why."

"Get out now!"

A bluff had worked with her father back on the school grounds. "Whether you've had the abortion yet or not, some tissue from the fetus is kept as evidence in the rape case. And tested, Lisabeth, including for DNA."

Hamilton let out a wail that didn't sound any better coming from her than its mate had from Devonne Tinch back at the Middlesex jail.

I took another step into the room. "And this time, the DNA won't match my client's."

From behind me, I heard the choked voice of the Honorable Willa Hamilton manage to say, "You move, and I'll shoot."

We made an odd trio. Lisabeth, still lying on her bed, crying in denial. Mrs. Hamilton, standing, with her makeup ruined and her hands shaking around a short-barreled revolver, its muzzle wavering but close enough not to miss if she emptied the thing in my direction. And me, sitting in the frilly reading chair next to Lisabeth's computer hutch.

"Judge, put down the gun and call Sergeant Detective Smith."

"You broke into our house, and I—"

"I walked in, the doors were open. And what motive would I have for harming either of you?"

"You're working for that monster, that—"

"Judge, private investigators don't kill complaining witnesses. We interview them, dig around a little, even figure some things out."

"What . . . things?"

I'd finally broken through. Maybe. "Your daughter became pregnant all right, but not by rape and not by Devonne Tinch."

Hamilton's eyes told me this wasn't news to her, and I hoped that would make the difference.

I said, "My money's on a certain quarterback, from a tryst about two months ago. But when Lisabeth discovered she was pregnant last week, she'd have had to decide what to do about it. Since your daughter's underage, she'd also have to get her parents' permission. Not exactly likely, given your husband's 'pro-life' placards in the family room downstairs. There's a procedure Lisabeth could have followed to get a court-approved abortion without parental permission, but your daughter would probably fear that one of your judicial colleagues would leak the news to her mother. Unless, of course, the pregnancy was the result of a rape, which would let Lisabeth go the parental route and make it 'acceptable,' family relations-wise."

"That Tinch monster raped my daughter."

"No good, Judge. Lisabeth knew she'd need to give you an extreme case to guarantee the abortion, and so she chose an anonymous somebody from another race as the unwilling donor. Ah, correction: My client 'donated' voluntarily enough; he just didn't know that Gloria would bring the used condom to your daughter, who smeared the contents on her clothes before going to the police."

"That . . . is . . . absurd."

"Then why aren't you asking your daughter to deny it?"

No response.

I said, "Devonne was in Calem thanks to METCO, but he never revealed the juvenile offense that put his DNA into the Registry's database. He didn't tell his girlfriend, either, so given Lisabeth's and Gloria's long friendship, he was the perfect donor, as the two girls probably thought any 'black' DNA specimen would back up the rape charge, and, by Lisabeth claiming not to recognize—or even be able to identify—her 'masked attacker,' the abortion happens quietly with that grudging but understandable parental permission. Only Devonne's DNA was 'matched,' and I'm guessing Gloria went ballistic as the news reports played out and she realized what she'd conspired to do. She confronted your daughter in the schoolyard this afternoon."

Time to play my last card. "And then Gloria went ballistic with you."

Her Honor shook her head. "You're out of your mind."

"At first, I liked your husband for it. He seemed to have the temper and certainly the strength. But he was off with son Kenny at that soccer game, right? And when Gloria decided she couldn't convince Lisabeth to tell the truth, she did the most rational thing in the world: Gloria turned to her friend's mother—who's even a *judge*—to right a terrible wrong."

Willa Hamilton's hands dropped, the gun following the right one to her side, and not very gracefully, she slumped into a miserable sitting position on the thick carpet. "Gloria came here, demanding—*demanding*—that I call the police, the jail, everybody in sight, to exonerate her boyfriend. I tried to reason with her in our family room downstairs, to tell her we might be able to resolve it all quietly, but she screamed back that 'my Devonne' isn't 'jailing' quietly. She started to storm out of the room, by the tiled steps, and I grabbed her, just to spin her around and talk sense to her. But she stumbled—those stupid laces at the bottom of her sweatpants—and she fell backwards and hard onto the edge of . . . The sound her head made . . ."

Speaking of sounds, I'd been so focused on Willa Hamilton and her gun that I hadn't registered that her daughter wasn't crying anymore. Just as I looked to the bed, Mrs. Hamilton said, "Then I wrapped poor Gloria in a shower curtain, and I drove to the park."

That's when Lisabeth sprang like a leopard from the bed and onto her mother, screaming and tearing at her hand for the revolver.

I'd just managed to pin the daughter's hands behind her and scoop up the gun when her mother said in an anguished voice, "Honey, I didn't want to kill Gloria, but once her life was already gone, I didn't want anybody else's life to join hers."

I thought about the tiled step and Mrs. Carson's parable from Cuba.

"Two birds with one stone."

"What?" said Willa Hamilton.

I shook the cartridges out of the revolver's cylinder. "Skip it." 🐦

RED CHRISTMAS

STEVE HOCKENSMITH

*Once upon a time in an enchanted land far away . . .
(or, to be a bit more precise, on December 24, 1980,
at eleven twenty-seven P.M., at the North Pole.)*

Jingle the elf noticed a peculiar package under the workshop's massive Christmas tree. There were dozens of boxes nestled around it: gifts to and from Santa, Mrs. Claus, the elves, the reindeer, and Rumpity-Tump the Icicle Man, who worked for the Clauses chasing away *National Geographic* photographers and cleaning out the deer stables.

But this particular present stood out from the rest for a very special reason.

"Jeez," Jingle said. "That's gotta be the crappiest-looking thing I've ever seen under Santa's tree."

And indeed it was. The wrapping paper was crinkled and smudged, and the bow-work was shockingly shoddy, the beautiful red ribbon mangled and smeared with inky black fingerprints.

Jingle shook his head in disgust. "Looks like the guys down in Wrapping started pounding the glogg before the Old Man even took off."

"Dishgushting," said Jingle's brother Jangle, who'd had a few snorts of glogg himself. "We oughta shay shomething to the foreman. Ish there a name on the tag?"

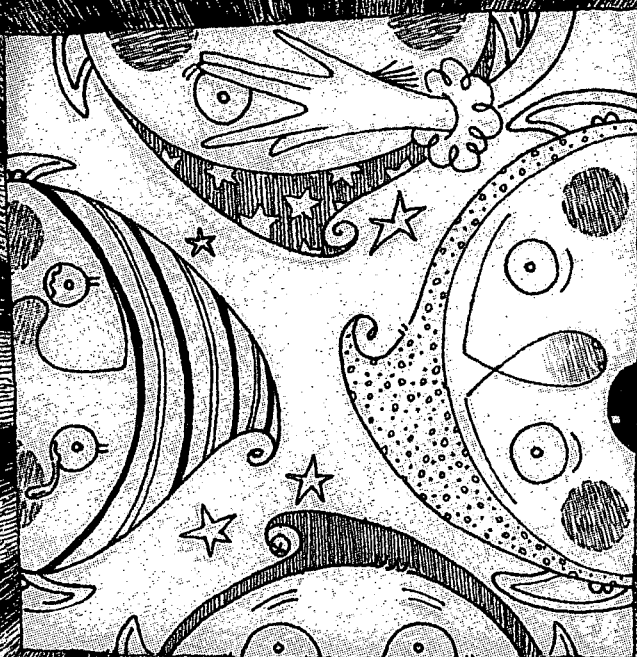
Jingle moved closer to the package. It was big—almost as big as Jingle himself. He found the tag buried under a long loop of loosely tied ribbon.

"'To Santa,' " he read aloud. "'From R. with love.' "

"'R,' huh? Maybe it'sh from Rudolph."

"Doesn't look like it's been in a deer stall," Jingle said, peering at the wrapping paper. "I mean, it's got stains on it, but not . . . you know . . ."

"Yeah, I shee what you mean," Jangle agreed.



(Despite Rumpity-Tump's best efforts, the deer stables were far from pristine.)

"Well, whoever 'R.' is, he's not one of the guys in Cards, Tags & Notes," Jingle announced. "The handwriting's terrible."

He tried to pick up the box and give it a test shake, but it was so heavy he could only lift one corner. Something inside the box shifted with a muffled tinkle, and the edge along the floor turned dark and glistening.

"It's leaking."

"Oopsh," Jangle said. "You broke it. Shanta'sh gonna be pished."

"I didn't break it. Whatever it is, it was already . . ."

Jingle's words choked to a stop as a sour-sweet smell reached his nose. It was the scent of gingerbread and peppermint and magic, with an undertone of paint and glue and sweat.

Elf blood.

Since Jingle's reflexes hadn't been dulled by glogg, he was the one to start screaming first. Jangle quickly joined in, though. The two elves scrambled out from under the tree and dashed shrieking through the hallways of Santa's castle. Santa himself had been airborne nearly an hour, so there was only one person they could turn to.

"Mrs. Claus! Mrs. Claus!" they yelled in unison (though Jangle's cries sounded more like "Mishush Claush! Mishush Claush!").

They found Santa's wife in the kitchen stirring an enormous cauldron of borscht. It was the only thing her husband would eat for the next six or seven months, so gorged would he be on cookies and milk by night's end.

"Blood!" Jingle howled.

"Blloooooood!" Jangle added.

"Oh my, no," Mrs. Claus replied sweetly. "It's just borscht. Goodness, when you elves start nipping at the glogg there's no telling what you'll—"

Jingle grabbed one wrist, Jangle grabbed the other, and they pulled her away from the stove, out the door, and through the halls until she was standing before the giant Christmas tree, a dripping ladle still clutched in her hand.

Jingle pointed at the mysterious package. "Blood!" he howled again.

"Bllooooood," Jangle added dutifully, though he was a bit too winded by now to give it much oomph.

"Oh. I see," Mrs. Claus said. "Dear oh dear. Well, I suppose someone had best open it up."

A crowd began to gather around, but no one made a move

toward the box. Mrs. Claus sighed, whispered another "Dear oh dear," handed her ladle to Jingle, and stooped down under the tree's lowest branches. The ribbon and paper slid off the package easily. When she lifted off the lid, a chorus of gasps shook the silver bells on the tree.

Inside the box was the crumpled form of an orange-haired, cherub-faced elf.

"Deary deary dear," muttered Mrs. Claus, employing the fiercest vulgarities in her vocabulary. "It's Gumdrop, Sugarplum's brother."

Another gasp echoed up into the rafters.

"Could he . . . could he have been . . . wrapped by mistake?" Jingle stammered.

Such things had been known to happen. Two years before, a pair of elves named Glitter and Sparkle had crawled into a box for a quick nap between shifts in Wrapping. Come Christmas morning, a horrified eight year old found their lifeless bodies crushed beneath a *Star Wars* Death Star play set.

Mrs. Claus reached into the package and gingerly shifted little Gumdrop.

"Oh deary deary deary deary deary," she said, which told the elves that whatever she saw, it was bad indeed.

"Wh-what?" Jingle asked.

Mrs. Claus moved away from Gumdrop, giving the crowd a clear view of his blood-soaked back. Protruding from it was the red and white curl of a large candy cane. The deadly confection was smudged with sticky black fingerprints, just like the wrapping paper and ribbon on the box.

"I'm afraid this was no accident," Mrs. Claus announced. "Someone here has been very, very naughty."

The gasps turned to shrieks. A reindeer handler named Holly fainted into the arms of her brother Jolly. Rumpity-Tump the Icicle Man became so frozen with fear he fell over and shattered, and his pieces had to be swept up and placed outside in the snow so he could pull himself together.

"A killer! A killer loose in the workshop!" Jingle wailed.

"And Shanta won't be back for hoursh!" cried Jangle, who'd been trying to steady his nerves with several long swigs from a flask he'd pulled from his vest pocket.

"Yes," said Mrs. Claus, nodding sadly. "It looks like the borscht will have to wait." She stepped out from under the branches and cleared her throat with dainty dignity. "Could everyone hush now, please?"

Her voice never rose more than a half step above a soothing whisper, ever, yet somehow her words carried farther and penetrated

deeper than if she'd screamed every word. The elves' lamentations and gnashing of teeth died away quickly, leaving only the sound of the wind outside and a quiet jingling somewhere high in the Christmas tree.

"Thank you. Now—is there anyone here who saw Gumdrop this evening?"

An elf toward the back of the room raised his hand.

"Yes, Snowflake?"

"Gumdrop was working with us in Nice Management this year. We finished the list up a little early and went to get some . . . uh, eggnog at Carol's place."

Mrs. Claus picked Carol's face out of the throng. "Carol?"

"Yeah, Gumdrop was there for a while. But he and my sister Noël . . . ummm . . . had a little too much eggnog and they went off to . . . make some mulled cider."

Mrs. Claus scanned the still-growing crowd for Noël's blushing face. "Noël?"

"Over here, Mrs. C. When we got to the bedro—I mean, the *kitchen*, Gumdrop realized he didn't have a . . . well . . . a . . . bag of mulling spices. There was one in his wallet, but he'd left it in his jacket at work. I might have had a bit too much *eggnog*, but I'm not stupid—I told him no spice, no cider. So Gumdrop went back to work to get his jacket." Noël wiped away a tear. "He never came back."

"He went back to Nice Management?"

"Yes."

"And no one else saw him after that?"

The room was still.

"I see." Mrs. Claus folded her arms and shook her head. "*Eggnog* and *cider-making* and *mulling spices*? My oh my."

The assembled elves hung their heads in shame.

"Well, you've been working so hard this year . . . I don't think we need to mention any of that to Santa."

The elves peeked back up at her sheepishly.

"But this business with poor Gumdrop . . ."

Something rustled high above in the tree, and a single ornament dropped from branch to branch, finally shattering on the floor just a few yards from Mrs. Claus. Everyone looked up.

At the top of the tree, tinkering with the brightly glowing star perched there, was a single elf.

"Hello, up there," Mrs. Claus said.

The elf peered down at her. "Greetingz." Then he went back to working on the star.

"Aren't you interested in what's going on down here?"

"Oh, it iz a zertainty. But I am having verk to do here, yez?"

"I think that can wait. Why don't you come down and talk to me?"

Mrs. Claus's tone was as sweet and lilting as ever, yet it was clear this was no request. It was a command.

"No," the elf said, not bothering to even look at her this time. "I think I finish my verk firzt, yez?"

"Oh. Well then."

Mrs. Claus took a deep breath and twiddled her thumbs for a moment. Disobedient elves were as rare at the North Pole as murders. There were no precedents for dealing with either one.

"Jingle, Jangle, everybody—stand back please," Mrs. Claus said when she'd decided on a course of action.

She reached into the lowest branches of the Christmas tree and began pulling off a long strand of shimmering garland. Once she had about thirty feet of it, she tied one end into a hoop and began twirling it over her head. When she let it go, the makeshift lasso sailed to the top of the tree and landed around the obstinate elf's right foot. With one quick, hard pull, Mrs. Claus closed the loop tight and jerked the little man into the air.

"Blahhhhhhhhh!" he squawked as he cartwheeled downward.

"Ooooooooooooh!" the elves cooed as they watched him fall.

"I'm so sorry," said Mrs. Claus after she'd caught him by the fluffy white collar of his green tunic, snatching him out of the air before he could splatter at her feet. "But I really do think it's awfully important that we talk."

She loosened the garland and set her tiny prisoner down. He was chubbier than most of his kin, and a little taller too. He bent back and stared up at the top of the tree.

"Very imprezzive, Mrz. Clauz," he said.

"Oh, why thank you," Mrs. Claus replied with demure humility. "I've always been handy with decorations. Now tell me, what's your name?"

"I em Geeftrap."

It took a few seconds for the syllables to take shape in Mrs. Claus's brain. "Giftwrap?" she asked.

"Yez. Bruther of Scotchtape."

"Hmmm. I don't believe I've heard you or your brother mentioned around here before, Giftwrap."

The other elves shook their heads and squinted at Giftwrap with growing suspicion.

"Ve are new thiz year," he said. "Before this ve are . . . how do you say? Ve cobble the shoez, yez?"

"I see. But this year you decided to become toy-making elves?"

"Yez. The shoemaker ve verk for, he moved hiz factory to Indonezia."

"My, how terribly disappointing. Well, let me take this opportunity to welcome you to Santa's workshop."

Mrs. Claus held her hand out to Giftwrap. He hesitated just a fraction of a second, then grasped her hand and gave it a limp shake.

"Thank you, Mrz. Clauz."

Mrs. Claus smiled, then glanced down as she let go of his hand.

"Goodness—is that ink on your sleeve?"

Giftwrap didn't answer directly. Instead, he spat out a word no one had ever dared utter in the presence of Mrs. Claus.

"Oh, now surely that kind of language isn't going to help matters any," she began to say.

She didn't get a chance to finish. The "Oh" was still on her lips when Giftwrap pulled a candy cane from his tunic and lunged at her with it. She barely managed to dodge away in time, and the razor-sharp candy sliced off a corner of her white lace apron.

"Oh, Giftwrap," Mrs. Claus said. "My niece made that for me."

But rather than apologize, Giftwrap lunged again.

"Mrs. C!" Jingle called out as he tossed her the ladle she'd handed him a minute before.

Mrs. Claus reached out and let the handle slap into her palm. Then she swung the ladle down just in time to parry Giftwrap's thrust. Giftwrap tried again and again, but each time Mrs. Claus turned the sugary blade aside.

"Now really, Giftwrap—is this helpful?" Mrs. Claus asked, raising her voice just a bit to be heard above the *clink-clank* of their duel. "You can't escape. Why not stop fighting and tell me what you've been up to? I bet you'll feel a lot better if you do."

"Bah!" Giftwrap snarled. With a dramatic flourish, he hurled his candy cane into the floorboards, where it stuck with a loud, vibrating *spronnng*. Then he reached into his tunic and pulled out something brown and log-like.

"Look out!" Jingle yelped. "He's got a fruitcake!"

"Yez! And I em not afraid to uze it!"

Giftwrap brought the fruitcake to his lips and took a savage bite.

"Daz vedanya, zuckerz!" he shouted, crumbs and bits of candied orange peel spraying from his furiously chewing mouth. He took a big, gulping swallow, and almost immediately his face turned blue. He collapsed, writhing and gurgling. After a few seconds, he stopped moving.

Jingle slowly approached the prone figure and gave it a cautious poke with the curled toe of his elf shoe. There was no response.

"I think he's dead."

"Dead? Deary deary dear," Mrs. Claus said as she stepped over to Giftwrap's side and stooped down to examine the body. "Oh, I thought so."

She reached out and plucked the pointy ears right off his head.

There was more gasping and fainting from the elves gathered around.

"Don't anyone fret now. They're fake ears," Mrs. Claus explained. "Giftwrap—or whatever his name truly is—is no elf."

"A man?" Jingle asked.

Mrs. Claus nodded. "Yes. A midget."

"Why would a midget come all the way to the North Pole just to kill Gumdrop?"

"Oh, I don't think he would. Not just to kill poor Gumdrop, I mean."

"I don't understand."

"I don't either, Jingle. But I do know this: We haven't seen the last of the naughtiness tonight."

Mrs. Claus put a pair of elves named Mistletoe and Poinsettia in charge of guarding the bodies, then hustled out of the room, Jingle at her heels. Jangle started to follow too, but the glogg had turned his legs to rubber, and the only way to stiffen them up again was to curl up under a bench and take a nap.

Nice Management was deserted when Jingle and Mrs. Claus arrived. They found Gumdrop's jacket at his desk, lying atop a pile of statistics, graphs, and pie charts analyzing the Naughty-to-Nice ratio of little boys who own albums by Kiss.

"Maybe Gumdrop never made it back to the office," Jingle said. "He could have been murdered anywhere between here and Carol's place."

"No," Mrs. Claus said. "I think it's much more likely he was killed right here."

She headed for the far end of the room, where Santa kept the tilted worktable he slaved over so many long hours each year. It was where he compiled The List—the massive scroll on which he kept the names of well-behaved children who'd earned a visit come Christmas Eve.

Mrs. Claus peered down at the worktable a moment. "Oh, goodness deary goodness," she said. "It's just as I feared."

She moved to the nearest garbage can, shook her head, and pulled out two twisted, broken, ink-smeared feathers.

"What a shame. Santa loved these," she said. "Griffin feathers. So hard to come by these days. Oh well. We have more to worry about now than Santa's favorite pens."

"That we do," Jingle said, nodding. "Uhhh . . . and what is it that we need to be worrying about, exactly?"

"Why, the name Giftwrap added to Santa's list, of course."

Jingle looked from Mrs. Claus to the feathers to Santa's worktable to Gumdrop's desk, blinking blankly. Mrs. Claus took mercy on him and explained.

"There were ink stains on the box Gumdrop was in, and on Giftwrap's sleeves, as well. And if you'll look at the table there . . ."

Jingle followed Mrs. Claus's gaze. A black smudge marred one corner of Santa's worktable.

"Southerners aren't accustomed to quill pens and ink bottles anymore," Mrs. Claus said, using the term Santa's elves favored for describing anyone who didn't live at the North Pole. "So Giftwrap made a bit of a mess. And I can only think of one thing he might have been trying to do with a pen at Santa's worktable. Poor, unfortunate Gumdrop saw what he was up to when he came back for his jacket. And . . . well, Giftwrap couldn't have that."

"Oh," Jingle said. "I see. Then Giftwrap had to make sure Gumdrop's body wasn't found until after Santa took off."

"That's right. Yet he wanted the body to be found eventually. That message on the card—it must have some special significance."

Jingle shook his head, bewildered and disgusted. "Sending a spy into the workshop, killing an elf, all just to get some kid on the Nice list. It's beyond naughty. It's nuts."

"Perhaps. Or perhaps this isn't about a child."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, maybe someone wants to make sure Santa goes down a certain chimney tonight."

Jingle gaped at her, amazed that a woman who'd devoted her life to making children happy and hanging out with elves would have such a natural affinity for the workings of devious minds.

"You think it could be a trap?" he said.

Mrs. Claus shrugged. "You know how those toy company people feel about Santa. And the religious fundamentalists. And the Elf Liberation Front. And the Ayatollah. He still hasn't forgiven us for all those lumps of coal he received as a child. And—"

The longer the list grew, the wider Jingle's eyes became. "I never realized Mr. C had made so many enemies."

Mrs. Claus's lips pulled into a small smile, sad but proud. "The good ones always do, dear," she said.

"Well, if it's a trap, we've got to warn Santa right away!"

Mrs. Claus sighed. "I wish we could. But you know as well as I do how hard that would be."

Santa always took the fastest reindeer, naturally, so catching him by following his delivery route would be next to impossible. On top of that, he didn't really *have* a set delivery route. If children were still awake inside a house when he landed on the roof, he had to move on and come back later. As a result, the longer the evening wore on, the more he ended up criss-crossing the globe, perhaps alternating a drop-off in Kenya with a stop in Kentucky. That always increased the odds that he'd get lost somewhere in between. Santa would never, ever, under any circumstances, stop to ask for directions, and as a result he could end up hovering confused over Antarctica or looking for Evansville, Indiana, in the Amazon rainforest.

"Plus," Jingle said after they'd both ruminated on all this for a quiet moment, "maybe he's already been captured or . . ." Jingle gulped. "Or whatever. He's been gone over an hour now."

Mrs. Claus grew pale, and an expression came to her face Jingle had never seen there before, a frown. But it only lasted a second.

"Now don't you worry, Jingle," she said, the rosy glow returning to her round cheeks. "Santa's going to be just fine. In fact, I think I know how we can help him. You run and find Ribbons and Bows. I want to meet them in their office."

Jingle straightened up and saluted. "Yes, ma'am!" And off he went.

He found Ribbons and Bows downing glogg shots at a hastily organized wake for Gumdrops. They were gruff, gnarled old elves who ran Request Processing with two little iron fists.

"Frank! Hank!" Jingle called out to them. Only the Clauses could get away with calling them "Ribbons" and "Bows." Anyone else who tried it got a punch in the nose. "Mrs. C needs you! Quick!"

They both threw back one more shot, then staggered off after Jingle. When they got to Request Processing, Mrs. Claus was already there sorting through the files on Frank's desk—an offense that would have gotten any elf another sock in the schnoz. But while Frank and Hank were too devoted to the Clauses to openly show their displeasure, Frank couldn't resist the urge to take the files out of Mrs. Claus's hands and begin fussing with the papers on his desk, spreading them around until they were in exactly the same state of disarray he'd left them in earlier that evening.

"What does the Missus need now, hey?" he asked. "You just sit back and let us dig it out for you."

"Thank you, Ribbons."

Frank's left eye twitched ever so slightly.

"We think a name was added to the Nice list at the last minute. But if someone wanted to lure Santa to a certain home—"

"They'd have to tell him what to bring, eh?" Hank finished for her.

"Exactly."

"So you'd be lookin' for requests that arrived today, hey?" Frank said.

"The later the better."

"Well," Frank said, thrusting his hand into a swaying tower of paper almost as tall as Mrs. Claus, "these are the last ones we got." Somehow he pulled out five letters without burying himself under an avalanche of envelopes.

"Double-rush late," Hank said. "Popped up when we thought we were all done. Barely got 'em processed in time."

"I see. Then these are the ones we want, Bows."

Hank's right eye twitched.

Mrs. Claus took the letters from Frank.

"Why, this first one's from little Martha Ortmann," she said. "Santa and I know all about her. She's a little angel."

Frank nodded. "Nice to old people."

Hank nodded too. "Kind to animals."

Even Jingle joined in. "Picks up her room. Brushes her teeth. Wipes off her boots before coming into the house."

Mrs. Claus shuffled the letter to the bottom. "I don't think we need to worry about Martha. Now how about this next one? Steve Hockensmith?"

Frank shook his head this time. "Picks his nose."

Hank shook his head too. "Fights with his brother."

Jingle joined in. "Pouts. Cries."

"My goodness. Coal?"

"Coal," the elves sang in chorus.

"Ahhhh." Mrs. Claus moved on to the next letter. "Gina McIntyre?"

"Nice," said Frank.

"But," said Hank.

"Read the letter," said Jingle.

Mrs. Claus cleared her throat and took the letter out of its envelope. "Dear Santa," she read aloud. "I have been extra good all year long, but I do not want any dolls, games, or books this Christmas. You can give my toys to a poor child who needs them more than me." Mrs. Claus smiled. "How precious."

"Keep reading," Jingle said.

Mrs. Claus looked back down at the letter. "But there is something I would like—my very own . . . Oh." She peeked back up

at the elves, who stared back at her, frowning indignantly.

"Elf," Mrs. Claus read. "I promise to feed it and take it for walks and . . ." Oh my."

"She's getting a puppy," Jingle said.

"I see. Well, I think what we're looking for wouldn't be quite so . . . colorful." Mrs. Claus pulled out the next letter. "Like this one. This little boy wants books, games, and a Farrah Fawcett Majors poster. All very normal. What do we know about this—" She squinted at the name scrawled across the bottom of the page. "Bill Reeves?"

Frank rolled his eyes. "Oh."

Hank rolled his eyes. "That one."

Jingle shrugged.

"Naughty?" Mrs. Claus asked.

"Eh," said Frank.

"Could be worse," said Hank.

"That's not the problem," said Frank.

"He's thirty-seven years old," said Hank.

"Ahhh," said Mrs. Claus. She placed the letter on Frank's desk. "Well, that is suspicious—if a bit transparent. I suppose it's the best candidate we have so far."

She flipped to the last letter, obviously hoping for something better.

Dear Mr. Claus,

I am seven years of age. I have been a well-behaved child this year. Thus I consider myself deserving of reward. To be specific, I think you should bring me candy and a toy truck.

I will look for the candy in my socks. You may place the truck beneath the Christmas bush. I will leave baked goods out for you to consume, as is the usual custom.

Cordially yours,

Bjorn Bjelvenstam

4000 Sundquist Road

(on the northernmost edge of town near the abandoned lutefisk factory—it will look dark, but do not let that be of concern)

Kalmar, Sweden

P.S.: There is a chimney on my house. Please feel free to make use of it in the fashion for which you have become so famous.

"Ah-ha," said Frank.

"Oh-ho," said Hank.

"Umm-hmm," said Mrs. Claus.

"I'll get the sleigh," said Jingle.

Minutes later, he and Mrs. Claus were in the air, headed for Sweden behind a team of young back-up reindeer.

"Now, Pac-Man! Now, Disco! Now, Yoda and Vader!" Mrs. Claus called out, giving the reins a gentle snap. "On, Ford! On, Carter! On, Alda and Nader!"

The reindeer strained in their harnesses, rocketing over Greenland and the Norwegian Sea toward Sweden. But they weren't fast enough.

"Oh no!" Jingle cried when they reached the outskirts of Kalmar. "We're too late!"

He stood up and pointed at the rooftops below. They were covered with sleigh tracks, hoofprints, and discolored snow—telltale signs that Santa had already come and gone.

The reindeer veered to the east then, changing course so suddenly Jingle lost his balance and nearly toppled over the side. The only thing that kept him in the sleigh was Mrs. Claus's hand reaching out to snag a handful of his green tights.

"Thanks," Jingle squeaked. "But where are we?"

"Look! Up ahead!"

In the distance, a pinprick of light gleamed through the gentle swirl of snow. As they got closer, they could see shapes in its soft red glow.

Antlers, a rooftop, a chimney.

And an empty sleigh.

"Take it easy, everyone," Mrs. Claus told the reindeer. "Let's try to make this a very *quiet* landing."

The reindeer slowed to a flying trot, then a gliding amble, and Mrs. Claus's sleigh slid into place next to her husband's almost without a sound.

"Well done, my dears," Mrs. Claus said as she stepped carefully onto the roof. There wasn't much room to move around. It was a small house, dark and forlorn, with no neighbors in sight other than a decaying factory half a mile up the road.

"Keep it steady there, buddy," Jingle told Rudolph, whose nose was beginning to strobe with excitement. "Where's Santa?"

Rudolph grunted and sneezed simultaneously, making a wet, snorting noise that, translated roughly, meant "I dunno." Comet and Cupid and the rest grunted and sneezed in agreement.

"Deary deary *dear*," said Mrs. Claus.

She was peering down into the chimney. Jingle crept over and pulled himself up to see what she was looking at.

A few feet below, metal bars gleamed in the moonlight. Mrs. Claus cleaned her glasses with her apron and leaned in to give them a closer look.

"They're mounted on some kind of spring mechanism," she said. "So when Santa got to the bottom of the chimney—"

"He couldn't get back out!" Jingle blurted. "You were right. It is a trap!"

Mrs. Claus shushed him. "Listen."

She turned an ear downward and bent over the chimney. Jingle imitated her.

Voices echoed up from inside the house.

"Me? Work for the KGB? Ho ho ho! Ridiculous!"

There could be no mistaking who it was. Santa was all right—for the moment.

"What could I possibly do for you?"

"Vell, you know what they zay," a heavily accented man replied. "He zeez you vhen you're zleeping. He knowz vhen you're avake. He knowz if you've been bad or good, zo be good for goodnez zake."

"Yes?"

"Don't be denze, fat man! You are the gratezt zpy the world haz ever known!"

"'Zpy'?"

"Yez, zpy!"

"I don't—"

"There iz no zecret our enemiez could keep from uz vith you on our zide!"

"On your what now?"

"Our zide! Thiz cowboy the Americanz have elected—Reagan. He planz to zpend hiz vay to victory over uz. Vell, let him try! Ve vill have zomething money cannot buy. You!"

"Wait now. What's all this about a cowboy?"

"Zoon you vill be zmuggled to the Zoviet Union in one of our submarines. And then . . . imagine the propaganda value vhen Zanta Clauz—the living embodiment of Veztern materializm—renounzez hiz vayz and zayz, 'At lazt, thiz red zuit of mine really ztandz for zomething!'"

"Fez turn materializm? My red zoot? Ho ho! Goodness, lad! I can't understand a word you're saying!"

"Here iz all you need to underztand. Our operative at the Pole haz hidden a bomb—a very *powerful* bomb—in your vorkshop. If you do not cooperate, ve vill reduze your toymaking elvez to zo much zmoke and duzt."

Mrs. Claus and Jingle locked eyes on each other, each of them stifling a horrified gasp.

"Zmoke and duzt?" a baffled Santa mused.

"Da! Zmoke and duzt! You know—*boom!*"

"Hmmm. I'm sorry. You're just not getting through. Maybe one of you other fellows can tell me what your friend's so excited about."

A string of Russian curses bounced up out of the house. "I vill blow up your caztle! It iz that zimple! Thiz iz the deztruct button here in my hand!"

"Oh! Ho ho! A bomb! I thought you said a very powerful *bum*. Now I see! Clever! Naughty, but clever! Ho ho ho! But let me tell you something, my friend. You'll never get anywhere in life with bombs and threats. Generosity and good cheer! Those are the things that really matter! Now why don't you let me out of this cage so I can be on my way? I've got toys to deliver! Ho ho!"

Santa's ho-hoing was cut off by more curses. The Russians were learning what Mrs. Claus and everyone else at the North Pole already knew.

Santa Claus was the sweetest man on the face of the Earth—and he was nowhere near the brightest.

At that moment, the real mastermind of the Claus clan was whispering quick instructions to Jingle. The elf gulped, nodded, hopped into Santa's sleigh, and told Rudolph and the other A-list reindeer it was time to fly their furry butts off. They were careful to take off quietly, but once they were airborne they streaked out of sight like a red-nosed rocket.

"Get it through your thick zkull, Clauz!" the Russian spymaster was screaming as they left. "Ve are not letting you go!"

"Really? My my my. That's a wee bit selfish, wouldn't you say? Think of the children."

"I am thinking of the children! The children who vill grow up in a better vorld because ve have overthrown decadent capitalizm and freed them from the grinding boot heel of the bourgeoizie!"

"Well, I don't know about all that. I just know how those good little boys and girls love their toys! Ho ho! And if they don't find them under the tree tomorrow—goodness! We can't have that, can we?"

Mrs. Claus heard a strangled cry that was, no doubt, "Oh, shut up!" in Russian. Santa didn't get the message.

"If you let me go now I'll still have time to stop and eat all the treats the kids have left out for me. You wouldn't believe how disappointed the children are if I don't eat those cookies! And all

those glasses of milk to drink! Speaking of which, I should probably make a quick pit stop before I get going. Ho ho ho! So if you'll just let me out of here . . ."

Mrs. Claus couldn't wait any longer. Another minute and the Russians might kill her husband out of sheer frustration. So she hopped in her sleigh, brought it around for a landing on the ground below, walked up to the front door, and knocked. A minute passed without an answer, so she knocked again. This time the door opened just wide enough for a tall man in a black turtle-neck and black leather trenchcoat to peek out at her.

"Yez?" the man said.

"Hello," Mrs. Claus replied pleasantly. "I'm here about my husband. May I come in please?"

The tall man frowned. "It iz late. You should go home. There iz no—"

Pac-Man the reindeer sneezed. The man poked his head out the door and saw the sleigh for the first time. A hand poked out the door too. There was a gun in it.

"Inzide, if you please."

"Thank you," Mrs. Claus said.

In the house were four more men in black turtlenecks and black leather coats. They were all wearing berets and sunglasses. And all of them had guns.

Santa was on the far side of the room, standing in a cage that surrounded the fireplace.

"Gladys!" he called out when he saw her.

"Gladyz?" one of the turtleneck men said. Mrs. Claus recognized the voice immediately. It was the spymaster.

"No, dear. *Gladys*," she corrected him. "With an s. But you can call me 'Mrs. Claus.'"

She moved toward him with her right hand out. There was a gun in his, and the look on his face indicated that they were not about to share a hearty handshake. Mrs. Claus stepped past the gun, threw her arms around the Russian, and gave him an enthusiastic hug. The spymaster stiffened like he'd been given an electric shock.

"Unhand me, voman," he spat.

"Oh, come now. Everyone needs a hug from time to time."

"Let me go!"

Mrs. Claus stepped back, shaking her head sadly. "Alright then. But you really shouldn't be afraid of a little human warmth."

"Ho ho ho! She's right, you know! You look like a man who could use a few hugs!"

"Zilenze, zimpleton!"

There was a comfy-looking armchair near the fireplace, and Mrs. Claus walked over and took a seat. All the guns in the room pivoted to follow her as she moved.

"Don't you worry, Santa," she said, folding her hands primly in her lap. "We'll have you out of there soon."

"Wonderful! Time's a-wasting! I'm not even halfway through my route! So many toys to deliver! So many notes to read! So many cookies to—"

"Yes, darling, of course. We know."

"No one iz going anywhere!" the spymaster barked. "A threat far away could not penetrate your thick zkull, Zanta. But now fate haz delivered uz a new hoztage—one you can zee with your own eyez." He brought up his gun and pointed it directly at Mrs. Claus's forehead. "Perhapz now you vill underztand that ve mean buzinezz. Vow to zerve uz, or your vife diez."

"Well, now . . . that's . . . I . . ." Santa stammered, finally beginning to grasp the situation. "You wouldn't really do a mean old thing like that, would you?"

A malevolent grin slithered across the Russian's lips. "Yez," he said. "I vould."

"I think he really would dear," Mrs. Claus said. "But he won't."

The spymaster cocked an eyebrow at her. "Oh? And vhy vouldn't I?"

"Because we returned your bomb." Mrs. Claus pulled out the control mechanism she'd slipped from his jacket after giving him a hug. "And I have this."

One of the turtleneck men blurted out a Russian phrase so foul it would have made a reindeer blush.

Mrs. Claus looked at him and shook her head reprovingly. "Such language," she said to him in perfect *Russkij*. "What would your mother say?"

"Sorry, ma'am," the henchman mumbled.

"Vhat do you mean when you zay you returned the bomb?" the spymaster asked, eyeing the remote control in her hand nervously.

"We took it back where it came from."

"Took it back? You mean . . . Mozcow?"

Mrs. Claus nodded. "The Kremlin."

Two of the Russians burst into tears. Another threw himself down and began kicking and pounding the floorboards. Another, the tallest and palest of all the turtleneck men, simply rolled his eyes and sighed loudly as if he'd already been through the exact same experience a hundred times before.

"Zteady, comradez," the spymaster said. "She iz bluffing."

"Oh, I assure you I'm not bluffing," she bluffed.

"Yez, you are. If you vere telling the truth, you could tell me where the bomb vaz hidden."

"Why, in the star at the top of our Christmas tree, of course."

There was really no *of course* about it. It was a guess. That little assassin Giftwrap had been up to something in the tree, hadn't he? If she were wrong, at that very moment Jingle would be dumping a perfectly good star in the Arctic Ocean while a bomb sat in the workshop, ready to blow the place to peppermint-scented smithereens if the Russians got their hands on the remote control again.

The spymaster laughed.

It took Mrs. Claus a moment to realize that it wasn't a gloating, "You old fool!" laugh. It was a bitter, "Why me?" laugh. Then she saw the slice of fruitcake he'd drawn from his black trench coat.

"Oh, come now," she chided him. "You don't have to take it that hard."

But it was too late for the spymaster. Within seconds his chin was covered in crumbs, and he was dead.

The tall, sighing spy moved quickly to the cage around the fireplace. He pulled out a set of keys and unlocked the door.

"Go," he told Santa. He turned to Mrs. Claus. "Hurry."

He followed them out to the sleigh and helped them both up into the front seat.

"I have to azk you," he said once Santa had the reins in hand. "At the North Pole, do you have . . . how you zay? Political azylum?"

"A xylowhat?" Santa asked.

Mrs. Claus smiled. "Get in." She waited for the tall Russian to get settled into the back seat, then swiveled around to face him. "So tell me, young man. What can you do?"

The secret agent shrugged. "I have been a zpy for zo many years. All I know iz thiz Cold Var."

"You don't have *any* skills?"

"Vell . . . I do know one hundred and thirty-zeven vays to kill a man."

"Oh." Mrs. Claus stroked her chin for a moment. "Well, maybe Rumpity-Tump could use some help in the stable."

"Ho ho ho!" said Santa.

The reindeer knew what to do when they heard that. So they did it. 🦌

A CRUST OF RICE

MARTIN LIMÓN

The soft flesh of Kim Ji-na's pudgy fingers shook as she poured steaming barley tea into an earthenware cup.

"He beat me, Older Sister," she said. "And then he stole my money."

Kimiko lifted the cup to her nose, savoring the aroma. Ji-na, the much younger woman, knelt on the warm *ondol* floor on the other side of a short serving table. The man Ji-na was talking about had been her boyfriend of almost six months, an American soldier by the name of Greene. His first name Ji-na didn't know, something difficult to pronounce. His rank, however, was corporal. One of his tattered fatigue shirts still hung in the wooden armoire. What unit had he been assigned to? Ji-na only knew 8th Army, which didn't narrow the possibilities much. Less than a mile away from this village of Itaewon stood the huge 8th Army headquarters, Yongsan Compound, teeming with over five thousand American GIs. He worked with engines, Ji-na told Kimiko. That much she knew because almost every night when he came home his fingers were cut and bleeding and covered with grease.

"Why did he leave you?" Kimiko asked.

Demurely, like a well-trained Confucian child, Ji-na lowered her eyes.

"He's returning to the United States," Ji-na said. "In a few days. He said we have to finish."

"But why did he beat you?"

Ji-na stared at Kimiko, black eyes flashing with indignation. "He said he wanted his money back. For the final month he wouldn't be spending with me. I refused."

Kimiko nodded her head sadly. She'd heard such things before. Since the end of the Korean War some twelve years ago, the people of Korea had been poorer than they'd been in living memory. Even poorer than they'd been under the Japanese occupation during World War II. And people had been forced to do anything to

survive. For a young girl like Ji-na, a young girl from the countryside, to land a rich American to take care of her was thought of as a great victory. A victory against hunger. A victory against begging on the street. What with their steady paychecks and their access to the PX—with its cornucopia of imported American-made goods—GIs were rich. Much richer than the average Korean.

Through a cloud of rising steam, Kimiko studied Ji-na. The young woman's eyes were blackened and her nose had swollen red and angry to almost twice its natural size. Her entire face was round, flushed with blood, and puffier than Kimiko remembered seeing it before.

Ji-na busied herself with offering a bowl of *nurungji*, crisp flakes peeled from the edge of an earthenware pot. Kimiko picked out one of the stiff shards of burnt rice and nibbled on the tasteless wafer, staring all the while at Ji-na's mangled fingernails.

"And why, young Ji-na," Kimiko asked, "did you call me?"

Ji-na bowed once again.

"Because you have vast experience," she answered. "With the Americans and with all sorts of foreigners."

This was true. When she turned fourteen, Kimiko had been expelled by her poor farm family who could no longer afford to feed her. She caught the train to Seoul, arriving only a few months before the forces of the Imperial Japanese Army surrendered to the Americans on V-J day. Since then, she'd lived here in Seoul in the district of Itaewon, making a living as best she could. She knew foreigners. She knew them very well.

"And what would you have me do?" Kimiko asked.

"Find him for me," Ji-na answered.

"To what purpose?"

"To retrieve my money."

Kimiko knew why Ji-na didn't go to the police. First, it was unlikely that the Korean National Police would ever be able to retrieve Ji-na's money. On their fortified compounds, the Americans were a government unto themselves. If the KNPs asked to talk to Greene, they'd be laughed at. Second, even if by some miracle the Korean police did manage to retrieve Ji-na's money, they would keep it for themselves. They certainly wouldn't turn hard cash over to a lowly "business girl."

Kimiko sighed and set down her cup. She was used to this. Many of the naïve young country girls who flooded into Itaewon came to Kimiko for help. They had no idea how to deal with Americans or what thoughts ran through their strange foreign minds.

"What's in it for me?" Kimiko asked.

"Ten percent of what you recover," Ji-na answered immediately. Ten percent of nothing, Kimiko thought, but she held out for twenty. Ji-na quickly agreed.

The first stop was the bars.

Shadows flooded the alleys of Itaewon and neon flashed bravely, chasing the spirits of the dead that swirled through the night. Kimiko wore a yellow dress with a high hemline to show off her legs and a low-cut neckline to show off her décolletage. After all these years, her body was what kept her in business. This despite the fact that she was almost twice the age of many of the young GIs who filled the nightclubs that lined the main drag of Itaewon, the most notorious red light district in Seoul.

Ji-na tagged along, wearing a long woolen skirt and a cotton scarf draped over her head, as if she were a widow in mourning. Such drama these young girls portrayed when they lost their first GI. In time, Kimiko knew, they'd become used to it.

The two women pushed through the double doors of the well-lit entrance of the King Club. Cacophonous rock music assaulted their ears and a thick cloud of cigarette smoke assaulted their nostrils. Kimiko stood at the entranceway for a moment while Ji-na studied the crowd. Finally, she pointed toward the bar.

"There," she said. "Two GIs. They are from the same compound as Greene. I saw them many times."

One was a short black man and the other a thin white man. They sat swiveled around on their bar stools, backs against the railing, studying the small sea of business girls through bleary eyes.

Kimiko charged forward. She grabbed the black GI by the elbow and twirled him on his stool until he faced her.

"Where he go, Greene?" she demanded.

The man's mouth fell open. Kimiko glared at him for a moment and when he didn't say anything she spit on the floor and swiveled on the other GI.

"Where he go, *Greene*?" she shouted.

"Compound," the thin white GI said.

"Why he no come Itaewon?"

The young GI sputtered, glancing around to see if anyone was watching him. The pale flesh of his face flushed red.

"I don't know," he answered finally. "Maybe he's afraid."

"Afraid of what?" Kimiko demanded.

The GI glanced at Ji-na. "Maybe her."

Kimiko spit on the floor again and then looked back at the black GI. "What compound Greene work?"

"Yongsan South."

"What company?"

"Twenty-one T Car."

Kimiko waggled her finger at the white GI's nose and then the black GI's nose.

"You see Greene," she said. "You say Kimiko find him most tick. Most tick Kimiko knuckle sandwich with him." She clenched her slender fist and held it up to the light. "You *arra*?" You understand?

Both GIs nodded.

Kimiko turned and, pulling Kim Ji-na behind her, exited the hot and noisy world of the GI bar known as the King Club. Out on the neon-spangled street, Ji-na struggled to keep up with the long-striding Kimiko.

The big archway above the guard shack said "Twenty-first Transportation Company (Car)." Twenty-one T Car.

Listless Korean security guards stood behind the large windowpanes of the shack, keeping a wary eye on Kimiko and Kim Ji-na. They'd already told Kimiko that Korean civilians couldn't enter the U.S. military compound, and when she protested they backed up the prohibition with a threat of violence. Wisely, Kimiko backed down.

"Koreans are not dumb like Americans," Kimiko told Ji-na.

Ji-na didn't quite understand why Americans were dumber since Americans were richer than Koreans, but she knew better than to contradict the older woman. It was almost midnight now, and Kimiko hadn't bothered to wear a coat. The creamy flesh of her legs and her bosom and her upper chest and shoulders were dotted with aggressive mounds of gooseflesh. Ji-na wasn't quite sure what they were waiting for but when an American army jeep with a lone driver pulled up to the gate, she found out.

Ignoring the Korean security guards, Kimiko stepped forward, leaned into the passenger side of the jeep, smiling, and cooed some strange foreign words to the driver. He was an older American man, maybe forty, with a long row of yellow stripes on his arm. Within seconds, Kimiko turned and was waving for Ji-na to join her. With the deft movements of long experience, Kimiko pulled the front seat of the jeep forward and Ji-na climbed into the back. Then Kimiko sat in the passenger seat and the American sergeant barked something to the Korean gate guards. Reluctantly, they pulled back the chain link fence that blocked the roadway and the GI, Kimiko, and Ji-na drove under the arch into the big open parking area of Twenty-one T Car.

Kimiko didn't glance at the sullen gate guards and didn't savor her victory by flashing them a satisfied smirk. That's when Ji-na decided that Kimiko was even wiser than she had originally thought.

Within minutes, the GI sergeant was pounding on one of the doors in the big GI barracks.

"Greene!" he shouted.

The door creaked open and a bleary-eyed young American, naked except for a flimsy pair of jockey shorts, stood rubbing his eyes.

"Where's Greene?" the sergeant barked.

"Out," the GI answered. "Ain't seen him all night."

"Curfew's in ten minutes."

The young man shrugged. "Apparently he ain't coming back."

The sergeant pushed past the GI and searched the room. A second bunk lay empty and unused. The sergeant told the GI to go back to sleep, and he and Kimiko and Ji-na stood outside the door in the hallway, waiting until the midnight curfew had come and gone.

"Greene ain't coming," the sergeant said.

Then he took Kimiko and led her outside and across the parking lot to another barracks. Ji-na followed. Kimiko and the sergeant went inside for almost an hour. Out in the parking lot, Ji-na waited. Finally, Kimiko emerged, looking none the worse for wear. Together, Kimiko and Ji-na returned to the main gate and walked the half mile back to Itaewon, slinking through unlit alleys.

The next morning, Kimiko dressed more conservatively. She, like Ji-na, wore a long woolen skirt and a warm knit sweater and a cotton scarf over her head. Together, they sat on a hard wooden bench in the Itaewon police station, waiting their turn to be seen by an investigator.

When Ji-na's name was called, they entered a small cement-block back room and sat on wooden stools in front of a gray metal desk. Behind the desk sat Sergeant Oh Byong-gul. His khaki uniform was neatly pressed and his black hair slicked back with a scented pomade. Using the tips of his fingers, he held a Turtleboat Brand cigarette parallel to his nose. Spirals of pungent smoke drifted to the ceiling.

Kimiko spoke first. She explained that Kim Ji-na had been robbed and beaten by an American GI and she further explained how, together, they'd searched for him but had been unable to find him.

When she was finished, Sergeant Oh stared at Kimiko for a long time.

"You're a business woman," he said.

Kimiko nodded.

"So is this young one here."

Kimiko nodded again.

"So you must know how business works. Sometimes you make money, sometimes you lose money. But when you lose, you must pick yourself up and resolve to work harder. Wouldn't you agree?"

"But it was theft," Ji-na said.

For the first time, Sergeant Oh looked at her.

"Theft? It was the man's own money."

"But he gave it to me."

"For services you didn't provide."

"But I did provide him service. For six months I cooked for him and cleaned house and washed his laundry and tied his bootlaces before he went to work. I did everything for him. I gave him all I had."

And then she was crying, holding her face in the splayed fingers of her hands.

Both Kimiko and Sergeant Oh stared at her. Neither one of them reached for her. After a time, Sergeant Oh puffed on his cigarette. Kimiko thought how round and flushed Ji-na's face looked. When Ji-na's sobs turned to sniffles, Kimiko turned back to Sergeant Oh. "Fifteen percent," she said.

Oh barked a laugh. "For all that work?"

"What work? You contact the Americans, tell them Greene stole the money from a Korean citizen, they recover it for you."

Sergeant Oh shook his head sadly. "You think it works that way? The Americans believe all Koreans are thieves. They think a woman like this . . ." He pointed at Kim Ji-na. ". . . does nothing but take advantage of their innocent young soldiers. They won't lift a finger to help her."

"So, if the Americans won't help," Kimiko said, "arrest Greene when he comes out here to Itaewon."

"And land in trouble with my superiors for harassing the brave Americans who are here to protect us from communism?" Sergeant Oh laughed again. "You must be out of your mind."

"Forty percent," Kimiko said.

In a tin ashtray, Oh stubbed out his cigarette. "The money's gone. She'll never get it back. Forget it."

He barked for a guard, and Kimiko and Miss Kim Ji-na were escorted out of the Itaewon police station.

Out on the street, Kimiko said, "Now do you understand?"

Ji-na bowed her head. "Now I understand, Older Sister. None of them will ever help me. I must help myself."

The smell of burnt beans filled the cold morning air. Kimiko and Kim Ji-na stood at a public phone just outside the entrance to the Hamilton Hotel Coffee Shop. Using a handful of bronze 10-won coins, Kimiko placed the call. It took her fifteen minutes to reach the 8th Army switchboard, but finally she made it through and was transferred to the orderly room of the Twenty-first Transportation Company (Car).

Greene pulled duty last night, Kimiko was told, at the 8th Army head shed, which was why he hadn't been in his room last night. He was still unavailable, but the GI on the other end of the line was friendly and promised to give Greene the message. He repeated it back to Kimiko.

"Meet Kim Ji-na tonight in Itaewon at her hooch. She won't be angry."

"You got it," Kimiko said.

She flirted with the GI a few more minutes and then hung up.

"Will he come?" Ji-na asked.

Kimiko shrugged. "Maybe."

Kimiko did her best to put Kim Ji-na's troubles out of her mind. That evening she made her usual rounds, hopping from nightclub to nightclub, tossing back shots of bourbon, putting up with insults from GIs and evil stares from younger business girls. It was a normal night. She made a few bucks and tried not to think of who she was or what her future held. The booze helped. At the end of the evening, exhausted, she returned to her hooch.

Alone on her down-filled mat, she tossed and turned, sleeping the troubled sleep of someone who knows she's doing everything wrong but has never found any other way to survive.

The midnight to four A.M. curfew had just ended. Despite the early hour, Kimiko rose from her sleeping mat and put on the same woolen skirt and knit sweater and cotton scarf she'd worn yesterday. She slipped on sandals over thick socks, left her hooch, and made her way through the dark and empty streets of Itaewon. Hugging herself against the cold, she hurried toward the home of Kim Ji-na.

Last night, early in the evening before she started her rounds,

Kimiko hid outside of Ji-na's hooch. She waited almost an hour, but finally she'd seen the GI known as Corporal Greene enter Ji-na's home. Bearing gifts. A brown bag overflowing with PX groceries. Kimiko lingered a while, wondering if there would be an argument, waiting for shouting and shrill voices. But all had been quiet. Then the lights were turned off and Kimiko listened for a while longer. When she heard nothing, she left.

Still, she knew what to expect this morning. And that's why she decided to be here at Kim Ji-na's hooch early, before anyone else arrived.

The front gate was locked.

Three other families lived in the hooch complex so Kimiko knew she had to be quiet. She checked in either direction to make sure the alleyway was empty. When she was sure that everyone in the neighborhood was still sleeping, she found an empty wooden crate and propped it against the wall. Stepping atop it, she grabbed the top of the brick wall, studded with broken shards of glass, and carefully pulled herself up and over.

The courtyard was deserted. No roosters. No small dogs to bark and announce her arrival. She approached the latticework, oil-papered door that led to Kim Ji-na's hooch. Carefully, she slid it open.

In the dark, Ji-na sat against the wall. Fully clothed. Staring straight ahead.

Kimiko shoved back the door even wider, allowing moonlight to flood in.

Corporal Greene lay in the center of the hooch, surrounded by a sea of blood. Below him, sopping up the gore, lay scattered shards of *nurungji*, crusted rice.

Kimiko stared into Ji-na's eyes for a moment. Vacant. She was still alive, still breathing, still unhurt, but her mind was far away, in a land of lotus blossoms and sweet rice cakes and silk gowns wafting in a spring breeze.

Gingerly, Kimiko entered into the hooch, being careful not to step into puddled blood. Greene's body didn't move.

Kimiko crawled toward Kim Ji-na and placed her fingers on the soft flesh of her cheek. Cold. And she didn't flinch at the touch. Leaning closer to the woman, Kimiko slipped her hand inside Ji-na's tunic, beneath the waistband of her skirt. There, in her belly, the hard spherical rise that Kimiko knew she'd find. Kimiko withdrew her hand.

All along, from the first moment she'd been summoned by Kim Ji-na, Kimiko had seen it coming. Years of experience in the brutal

world of Itaewon, in the brutal world of survival, had made Kimiko prescient in the ways of the young innocent girls just in from the countryside. And there were clues.

First, the puffed face of Kim Ji-na. It meant only one thing. She was pregnant. Second, the claim that Corporal Greene had stolen her money. Most GIs, once they pay, never ask for their money back, especially if they know they are leaving forever and leaving the Korean woman with child. They're soft hearted, these Americans. Most of them anyway. And third, the beating Ji-na had received. The wounds to the nose and eyes probably were self-inflicted, to gain sympathy from whoever would listen. The nails bent back and broken, most likely as a result of holding onto Corporal Greene and begging him not to leave. Whatever damage Greene had caused to the body of Kim Ji-na was probably in self-defense as he tried to flee. And finally, the claim that he had left her early, before the day of his flight out of the country. Why hadn't he stayed with her until the very end? Because he'd seen the need in her, a need that he could not meet, and he'd fled in fear, in fear of having his young life held back by the needs of a young Korean business girl who was now with child.

The reason Kim Ji-na wanted to see Corporal Greene wasn't to recover her money. The real reason was that she wanted to beg him not to leave her. And if he was going to leave her anyway, despite her pleas, Kim Ji-na knew that her life was over. At least a life that would have any shred of self-respect. And Kim Ji-na, like so many of these young cast-off country girls who find their way to Itaewon, wasn't tough enough to live a life without self-respect. So, if Kim Ji-na had to leave her life behind, she would force Greene to leave his behind as well.

When she reached the old wooden armoire, Kimiko slid open drawers. There, beneath a folded silk comforter, sat the pile she'd knew she'd find. Stacks of blue money. MPC. Military Payment Certificates printed by the U.S. Army so they wouldn't have to pay their troops in greenbacks. Kimiko pulled out the stack and counted it. Over four hundred dollars. Two months' pay for a corporal. What Greene had left with Ji-na to get her by until she could give birth to their child. That's why he'd been pulling extra duty at night, probably being paid to do so. Put the baby up for adoption, that's what he would've told Kim Ji-na. I have to return to the States. Return to my family. I have to continue with my education. Get on with my life. Kimiko had heard it all before. In tearful conversation after tearful conversation, until she'd grown weary of the whole repetitive drama.

Kimiko thought of leaving some of the money but decided against it. No sense letting the Korean National Police divide it amongst themselves. Instead, she stuffed the bills into the deep folds of her skirt pockets.

Kim Ji-na continued to stare forward, as if gazing longingly into a better world where a crust of rice wouldn't be the biggest treat of the day. The sharp chopping knife, blade smeared with blood, lay by her side.

Apparently, she'd waited until Greene fell asleep. He'd probably woken with a start, feeling the blade chop into his heart, and then passed out again in shock.

How had Kimiko been so certain that Ji-na would go through with it?

Intuition. She'd seen so many country girls ruined by GIs. Some of them killed themselves; only a few of them had the courage to take the GI with them.

Kim Ji-na had that courage.

Across the street, a rooster crowed.

Kimiko scooted closer to Kim Ji-na and once again touched her cheek.

"In prison," Kimiko whispered, "you'll never have to worry about hunger again. They'll feed you every day."

Ji-na didn't answer.

Being careful not to disturb the carnage surrounding her, Kimiko backed quietly out of the hooch.

Outside, Kimiko strode through the dark alleys of Itaewon. The bundle of cash in her skirt swung impatiently against her thigh. She thought of Corporal Greene and Kim Ji-na and the baby that would be born in a few months. She wanted to cry but she knew she wouldn't. Those tears had been shed many years ago. There were no more left. But even if there were, what good would they do? 🐦

MARLEY'S GHOST

JOHN C. BOLAND

"I saw Vlad in New York. He looks better."

"Did you speak?" Charles Marley asked.

"Of course not. No point in opening old wounds." Oleg sipped tea, glanced at the wintry bustle on Connecticut Avenue, and steered the conversation back to his book. "The work on my memoir is three-quarters finished, more than three-quarters. But the publisher has lost enthusiasm. There are too many memoirs from the period, they say."

"There have been others," Marley agreed.

"If pages full of lies are a memoir, then you are both right." Oleg squeezed the cup onto its saucer with a rattle. He settled back. It was warm in the hotel dining room, but he wore his expensive overcoat on his shoulders to prevent its being stolen. He had held his cup the same way, Charles Marley thought, and to the publisher's dismay, Oleg had probably held tightly to his better secrets as well.

After both men had been silent for a minute, Oleg said, "We were onto him early. I'm speaking of Vlad. You only received from him what we intended for you to have."

"He was never productive," Marley agreed. The words triggered an unwanted thought that if Vlad had been productive the intelligence service might have taken better care of him. He said, "Is Vlad in your book?"

"No, I would not embarrass you, my old friend." Sighing, Oleg added, "Besides, this publisher wants tales of adventure, when I am not giving away the dirty little secrets. Vladimir Davidovich was nothing, there was no excitement in capturing him. He was a coward who finally told us everything he knew. Where is the value in such a story? In our time, Charles, we seldom encountered adversaries worthy of us. Don't you agree?"

"When you saw Vlad, where was he?"

Oleg raised his hands. "Near my publisher's building. Let me tell you, I was surprised. A taxi had brought me from the train station



Ron Chironna

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and when I got out almost the first thing I saw was this bony rat's face from the old days. He did not notice me. He was operating a vendor's cart, and a policeman was arguing with him." Between his fingers, Oleg laughed. "Still getting into trouble, after all these years."

For a moment, Marley dropped his gaze to his cup. The coffee had gone cold. He thought he could leave.

Oleg shook a finger at him. "Your people were always so sanctimonious about our handling of social parasites. Well, what did you expect? We produced so many of them! Vladimir Davidovich is proof that some people will end at the bottom of whatever society adopts them. Don't you agree?"

The thought of being locked in a warm taxicab repelled Marley, so he walked to his hospital board meeting. For the first block he managed to focus his mind on the frozen Washington sidewalks. Ribbons of ice curled across the pavement. The streets in Moscow had always been cleared, even after an unexpected October snowfall. Politics might thaw, but not the streets. And the politics hadn't changed much. Even in a thaw, Marley reflected, we needed something to occupy us, so we went on recruiting. He had met the young graduate student from the Moscow Conservatory four months after the Berlin Wall fell, in the apartment of a journalist. Innocent and fun, the evening had had no agenda except a well-lubricated celebration. Vladimir said it was as if all Europe's windows had opened at once. "Fresh air makes us giddy," he said.

I was giddy too, Marley thought. But my job was to muck around. It wasn't just habit that kept me doing it. We still had to know what was going on in the ruling cliques, how far Gorbachev would go, which way the Army would march. Had the arrests steered off a KGB coup? Important questions. What we thought we could do with the answers wasn't clear, but I never saw our section as a headless body going on without a purpose. The purpose was as important as it had ever been. It was only after the fact that you knew how things turned out.

Recruiting Vlad had not been on his mind that night. Young music students didn't make Marley's target list. Men and women with family ties in the party hierarchy weren't on the list either; as contacts they could be useful, but the ones who could be recruited as agents were idealists or malcontents. Either type blipped on the security apparatus's radar. Idealists and malcontents who had worked their way into the system over half a lifetime had

learned to hide their social illness. They interested Marley and his colleagues.

Vlad recruited himself. "My father is General Zavenyagin," he said idly. "Careless. Brings satchels full of work home."

His father had never asked himself a single fundamental question, on any subject, according to Vlad. His mother believed the only questions that mattered were the size of the family's apartment and whether the General's next assignment included a chauffeured Zil. The state had not shot generals in many years. The family had a good life.

They were on the sidewalk outside the journalist's apartment when Vlad dangled the bait. They were alone.

Marley's first concern was not getting himself ejected from the country by succumbing to a novice provocateur.

When he thought about it, the young man had been selling himself hard all evening. "We're all edgy now, everyone hoping for true reform.

It was only after the fact
that you knew how things
turned out.

Do you know what it's like? It's like seeing everyone having wonderful sex all around, while you wait for word that it's okay to take part. But in your soul, you know Mikhail Sergeiovich will raise a hand at the last moment and say no, stop, you must wait another fifty years. That is a long time to go without." And later, when he seemingly was no more drunk: "We can't hang them all, and whoever's left will carry on."

Oleg was right about the boy's face. Bony, rodent-like in its hunger. Though he listened and watched attentively, Marley found nothing in Vladimir that he had grown to expect from people baiting a trap. There was no instant intimacy. There was little flirtation. When Vlad spoke about politics, it wasn't to denounce the terror of Stalin, the bromide of the undercover operatives. Instead, he expressed a young man's half-shaped belief that if Western-style democracy came, his country would flourish.

"I would like to travel then," he said, "perhaps concertize. The piano." He held up his broad, long-fingered hands. "A natural, you would say."

George Proffer, the newspaper writer, was present for the first part of that mutual seduction. Picking at the *zakuski*, Proffer said, "Vlad can travel. He's not part of the oppressed masses. Tell Charlie about Paris."

Rolling his eyes, the young man shaped a silent whistle. "I will go back. But it would be nice not to go by *permission*. My visa was for only three weeks."

"Did you perform?" Marley asked. It was an innocent question.

"It was two years ago. I wasn't ready."

"He could get bookings in Paris tomorrow," Proffer said. "Vlad's from a good family."

Marley raised a questioning glance.

"Believe it or not," Proffer said, staring at the bottle in his hand as if it could refute him, "this boy is too principled to take advantage of his connections. Rare anywhere, hmm, Charles? He doesn't want a career handed to him by Gos Concert."

"Crap," said Vladimir with a grin. "The creeps know if I ever got out, I would keep going. Have you ever been to Paris?"

As soon as Marley admitted he had been stationed on Rue de Rivoli in the early eighties, Vladimir peppered him with questions—had he ever been to this or that dive, did he know where Henry Miller had lived, did he know there were still émigré Russians running restaurants near the Odeon? "Seventy-five years after the Revolution," he said, "they've got pictures of Kerensky above the bar. Can you believe it?"

"What's this about Henry Miller?" Marley said.

"He was the first person to truly understand the twentieth century," Vlad said with a perfectly straight face. "That it was all going to be about sex."

Marley, who thought it had been about politics, nodded. He wasn't the least bit tight, but he thought it would be interesting if he had missed the point that Henry Miller and a young Russian student understood.

"Where did you hang out?" Vlad asked. He named a restaurant where students gathered. "I went there eight nights in a row. Gaulois smoke thick as butter. Pots of nondescript wine. Girls who didn't live with their parents. I could have stayed, but my education wasn't finished."

Proffer pulled a glass away from his nose and chuckled. "Haven't seen anyone so wide eyed, have you, Charlie, since your first trip to a whorehouse? Poor kid thinks the world outside is a party."

"Compared to life here, it is," said Vlad.

"You haven't met my editor," Proffer said in a tone that didn't invite argument.

Charles Marley kept his mind on the hospital board meeting. The other directors knew what he had done before his retire-

ment, but they were all people of the world who refused to be impressed or shocked. Several had worked for government. Only one board member joked in whispers that maybe Charlie still had a hand in. In which case, he added, the videotape of a certain sheik's colonoscopy had probably made it to Langley.

"Questionable taste, Pruitt," said the chairman.

Charles Marley stared past both men. Langley would have the sheik's medical results without his intervention.

"Well then, we're agreed?"

Of course they were agreed. People of the world didn't join boards to be disagreeable. On whatever the question was, they were agreed.

"He could be useful," the Moscow station chief had said. She had studied the profile of Vlad that Charles prepared, asked him questions that she believed were penetrating.

"General Zavenyagin, the boy's father, is five levels from the top," he said. "Doesn't see major stuff."

"Neither do we," the station chief said. "He might get promoted."

"A good man deserves to be," Charles said. When she didn't respond to his flippancy, he let his grin slide away. "Zavenyagin won't know if a coup is coming. He would be a follower, not a leader."

"We won't expect much from his son." The station chief's attention was moving on to something else, but Charles Marley had received his nod to see if Vladimir Davidovich could be recruited. The station chief looked up suddenly when Charles was at the door. "Maybe he will surprise us," she said.

"It's a *nom de guerre*, a cover name, isn't it," Vlad asked him the next time they met. "It's too literary to be your real name. You know, Dickens. Marley's ghost?"

"Someone should have told my grandfather—or his grandfather."

"Everyone knows what a cultural attaché does."

"When the political climate permits, I arrange exchange visits. Your ballet dancers for our bluegrass pickers."

"Banjos."

"Right."

"Duh-duh-duh DUH duh. The movie's been here. Must be pretty dull—the world's in ferment, and you're escorting hillbillies around Moscow." They were at Proffer's apartment again, alone, and Vlad was playing with him, enjoying his moment, knowing he had gotten someone interested—if not in himself, then in his father's satchels of work.

"What I was thinking," Marley said, "is I might try to get you some engagements in New York."

The narrow face mocked the offer. "If I help you, you'll see I play Carnegie Hall?"

"More like Queens College, if you're as good as Proffer says. Or places in Iowa. It would be part of an exchange of students. Up to you what you made of it. And whether you stayed. How good are you?"

"Ask Melissa." She was a young woman who came to some of the gatherings at Proffer's apartment.

"At the piano."

"I'm very good." He grinned confidently, but the look in his eyes wasn't so sure. "This is the nation of great pianists—and great alcoholics. I'm good enough for your Queens College, not quite ready for Carnegie Hall. In another year, maybe."

"Proffer says you're as good as Gilels was at your age."

Vlad shrugged. "Proffer's no music critic."

"But he's right?"

"Bound to be once in a while."

"And you want out."

"Oh, brother. You've seen through me." The young man dragged his hand down his face theatrically. "I thought I kept that hidden."

"You've been shouting it on the street corners," Marley said.

"It gets lost in the din there. Everybody wants out, more or less. The KGB can't arrest us all. Anyway, they're busy plotting against each other." He got up from the table where they'd been sitting. His elbows had rested on a magazine, *Literaturnaya Gazeta*. He turned several pages casually, then walked away. A foolscap sheet lay between the pages. With the heel of his hand, Marley swiveled the magazine and read the sheet. Before he finished, Vlad returned with a bottle of pepper vodka. He didn't bring glasses. "What do you think?" he asked. He tilted the bottle to his lips, then passed it to Marley.

What Marley thought was: *Are you sure you want to do this?* But he was too professional to ask. He had other words ready. "You're doing a service to your country, Vladimir Davidovich," he said.

Vlad laughed and demanded the bottle back.

The station chief was pleased. "James Jesus," she murmured, an expression she used often, which had nothing to do with divinity but invoked the memory of her favorite counterespionage

onage officer, whose surname was Angleton. "This needs to be verified, of course."

"Sure." He had read the foolscap memorandum through twice, taking no notes. It appeared to be what Washington would call a talking paper, outlining the pros and cons of the military recommending a hard line against restive republics that wished to weaken their ties to the Soviet Union.

"It's not much by itself," she said.

"No." Marley was having trouble suppressing a smirk.

"But if General Zavenyagin is privy to those discussions . . ." She snapped a glance that only caught Marley looking serious. "What does the kid want from us?"

"Vodka and promises," Marley said. "He wants to tour the West playing Schumann."

For just a moment, the station chief gave Charles Marley a blank stare, long enough for his mouth to drop open a crack at the discovery she didn't know Schumann, and then her stare turned scornful because he was so gullible. Not a good quality in an agent, being easily led—her head shake made that plain.

He heard Vlad perform nine days later at the apartment of an *apparatchik* who liked to pretend she ran a salon. There were a couple of poets in residence, but everywhere Marley went there were poets, or men who planned to become poets and drank seeking inspiration. One of the *apparatchik's* poets was a widely acclaimed dissident who had never been arrested. He was middle aged, wore faded jeans and a leather jacket, and had soulful eyes that lingered on young women. The hostess prevailed on him to recite, and when he compared the stars in the American flag to bullet holes, several of the Americans who were present applauded dutifully. One of the young women, with broad Slavic cheeks and a bitter mouth, grabbed her coat and left.

The *apparatchik* had a baby grand piano in her parlor. The cultural high point of the evening was Vladimir Davidovich's recital of some of the *Études symphoniques*, and Marley wondered what was it about Russians and Robert Schumann. The man sitting beside him insisted on humming along, an octave lower than the piano, as if every one of the miniatures was a dirge. Vlad's playing had maturity beyond his years. The boy kept his technique in check, though there were hints that it could run away if he let it. Much of the time he wore an apologetic smile, as if he knew the listeners had heard better. The

young man stopped in the middle of a passage, threw up his wide hands in a shrug. " 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' would come out better tonight," he said.

"No, no, Volodya," his hostess said insincerely, "you will be a great pianist."

Marley, who had spent half his life in recital halls, thought his young agent already was.

The young man shrugged. "I will play composers who are too dead to object," he said. He left with the girl named Melissa. Marley tried to remember what he knew about her. Her parents were schoolteachers. She was an art student. She was said to be an informer.

"How well do you know Melissa?" Charles Marley asked. They were sitting in a greasy smelling restaurant on the fringes of the Arbat. Vlad had delivered a parcel of recent memos his father had written, stuffed into a brown envelope, buried in a bag of turnips. If the KGB caught either of them with the bag, Marley thought . . . and let the thought trail away. *He* might be beaten, but it wouldn't be bad.

"She's a good girl," Vladimir said. "Very friendly."

Marley smiled. "That's important."

Vlad nodded, looked at Marley with curiosity he wasn't impudent enough to translate into words. Marley hadn't encouraged personal questions from Vlad. He could speculate to his heart's content on whether there was a mistress at the embassy or a wife at the American compound, or some other arrangement best not considered.

"What do you think of the General's scribbles?" Vlad asked. He had taken to calling his father the General, making the betrayal less intimate.

"That's for our analysts to say," Marley answered. "He's prolific."

"He doesn't want to be assigned to Afghanistan. So he keeps busy, nuancing his arguments in favor of whoever he thinks will win. That's how your analysts should view the material, Charles. A shrewd man's estimate of how it will all turn out." His smile could have been worn by a much older person. "A man has only one skin, so he must have a lot of principles. How did you like my playing?"

"Apparently I liked it better than you did." He almost said he thought it was as crisp and pure as Sofronitsky's, which he had heard only on old recordings. But one praised agents carefully if one wanted to keep them under control.

Vladimir made the small shrugging motion Marley had seen so often, and it occurred to the American that the young man had enough doubt. He sipped tea that tasted oily. The dump's proprietor was in the back, arguing with a woman.

"About Melissa," he said. "One of our people thinks she has ties to the KGB."

Vlad chuckled. "Who hasn't?"

Charles Marley slipped on the ice leaving his hospital board meeting and fractured his left ankle. It wasn't a severe break, but it was painful. For two weeks he was laid up at his townhouse in Foxhall Village, alone except for a thrice-weekly cleaning woman and two well wishers, each of whom visited only once. He rationed his pain medication, read novels that had found their way onto his shelves, and seldom thought about Vladimir.

The station chief's fervor had cooled as the analysts at Langley concluded that General Zavenyagin was far outside the decision-making loop and his memos contained little real intelligence. Nobody decided to cut Vladimir loose because he was viewed as low cost and low maintenance. But the station chief didn't invite Marley into her office to review each new packet of memos the young man provided. Marley wasn't sure she read them. The packets might have gone straight into the bag to Virginia.

He was getting around on a cane, an improvement on the walker, which made him feel like an old man, when Oleg called and said the publisher had postponed his book.

"I'm sorry to hear it," Marley said.

"Yes, well. Fortunately, I've met some people in New York. They import glass. Some of the glass is filled with vodka." He laughed heartily. "So I will get by. It's difficult, old friend. You were on the winning side, so you have a pension that is worth something."

"It doesn't stretch far," Marley said, wary that Oleg might ask for a loan.

"By the way, I saw your master spy again. He was on the subway that goes to Brooklyn, shaking a metal cup."

"Did you speak?"

"I looked around for a policeman, but what is it you say—there's never one when you want?"

After he hung up the phone, Marley wondered if he could get his old colleagues to ask about Vlad in New York. Immigration might have an address. On the way to his desk to look up a phone

number at Langley, he decided instead that even though it was only four in the afternoon, he needed another pain pill.

Oleg Ossovsky had called him in to KGB headquarters personally a few days after Vlad was arrested. "Suborning Soviet citizens, Charles! I'm shocked, simply shocked. All these months I believed you were going to poetry readings because you loved Pushkin. Then we have this embarrassment. It's no good for either of us, you know. I get a black mark for letting you run the little twerp under my nose. You get a black mark when we expel you." Big head shaking side to side, wide lips curled down in dismay, hazel eyes spilling regret, Oleg sat behind a polished desk, fingers laced across a striped vest, glancing down now and then to admire his own flowered necktie and wonder if the American recognized that it was from New York.

He had sat Marley in a straight-backed chair, suitable for embassy spies who got a dressing down before being ejected. Two years ago, it would have been much rougher. But now people like Oleg were looking ahead, wondering which way the tree was going to fall. If liberalization continued, it would mean the end of the old regime. One couldn't rule out trials in a post-Soviet Russia. If one needed to relocate, it would be good to be remembered by the Americans as humane and perhaps cooperative.

So Oleg Ossovsky was thinking, as he ordered brandy brought in and joked that he and Charles were both professionals and so he had no hard feelings.

Marley took a slightly harder line. "What 'little twerp' are you talking about?"

"General Zavenyagin's son. Come now, Charles. Vladimir Davidovich, your young friend."

"The piano player?" Marley asked innocently.

"No, I would say he is no longer a piano player." Observing Charles Marley's expression, Oleg waved a hand. "Vladimir will recover. Some of his interrogators were of the old school. Of course, I stopped them as soon as I found out."

"What did you do?"

Oleg scratched his forehead, decided to ignore the man's harsh tone. "There was no point in his holding out. We showed him the photographs of your meetings. We played tape recordings." He held up his palms. "He told everything to this girl he slept with. A total amateur."



They didn't expel Marley. The diplomatic thaw had become a small warm stream of goodwill that nobody wanted to disturb. It was six months before Vlad was released from a psychiatric hospital, and three months after that before Marley saw him at the apparatchik's salon. He understood then why Oleg's people hadn't shot the young man. Nobody played the piano that evening.

Marley caught up with Vlad on the stairs. "I'm sorry we couldn't help."

Vlad shrugged. He wore a black leather jacket, with his mangled hands hidden in the pockets. He turned away.

"What are you going to do?" Marley asked.

"Journalism." Looking over his shoulder, Vlad grinned. "There's an opening on the literary gazette. Another six months, we'll be exposing what the KGB did for the last seventy years. I think I'm going to be good at it. Nothing like personal experience, is there?"

When his leg was better, Charles Marley took the train to New York, stayed at a friend's apartment, and arranged dinner with Oleg Ossovsky and two Russians from Brooklyn. In an informal way, Charles was casting himself in Oleg's old role. He had offered to see what business the Russians were really in, and the person to whom he had made the offer had accepted. Oleg's friends had been with him in internal security. Both had thick shoulders and heavy faces, close-cut hair, scars on the cheeks or eyebrows. *Wrestlers* was the term for official thugs that Charles had picked up in Romania. He couldn't remember the word used in the old Soviet Union. So he thought of the men as wrestlers. Oleg had been a wrestler who no longer smelled of sweat. He teased Charles about Vlad, playing to his companions.

"We'll have a reunion one of these evenings," Oleg said. "Your little artist, you, me, plenty of *zakuski*, vodka." He spoke expansively, but his eyes were hard. "If I run into Volodya again, we may have a reunion without you, Charles."

"What do you mean?"

"I've seen the little shit too often for it to be accidental. Last week, he came into a saloon on Brighton Avenue where I was meeting friends. I know he saw me, because he left quickly. It occurs to me that he may be working for your people."

"I no longer have people," Charles said. "I have a pension."

"Then what happens to him won't matter to you."

"I think you're overreacting. Brighton Beach is full of Russians.

Where else would Vladimir hang out?" He reminded Oleg: "You and I met again by accident."

"At that party, yes. But afterward, I had to pursue you. You didn't keep turning up."

"Then I should be suspicious of you," Marley said.

Oleg laughed. "Unless you're much better than I remember."

"I was never good. That's why I retired."

"About Vladimir," said Oleg, who had been thinking. "Perhaps he blames me for his injury. Tells himself I cost him a glorious career."

"He was never sure about the career. You saved him from having to find out."

"So he should be grateful." Nodding, Oleg laid a hand on the shoulder of the large man beside him. "My friend Vassily broke tougher men in much less time. Vladimir held out for hours. There was no reason for it. We needed nothing from him, but it was the principle of the thing that he answer."

Marley nodded. He understood. "Vassily did the interrogation?"

The wrestler across from him grinned. "If you call snapping fingers an interrogation."

The wrestlers left around midnight, and Oleg looked after them shaking his head. "What these idiots are doing is far too risky for me," he said.

"What are they doing?"

"If you still have *people*, Charles, they may be willing to pay for that information. Do you think?"

Marley was still using a cane but almost as a prop. A middle-aged man in a good topcoat somehow looked better for having a shiny black cane, if he didn't lean on it too heavily. Leaving the restaurant, Marley took longer than he would have needed a year ago getting into a taxicab, and bent almost double he saw the thin sallow figure waiting in a cold doorway across the street. Oleg Ossovsky tottered onto the sidewalk, closing his coat over a half-zipped fly, and called good-bye to Marley. Oleg headed down the street. The man who had been in the doorway waited until Oleg was half a block ahead before following.

Marley's people were very much interested in what Vassily and the other wrestler were doing. They were interested in what Oleg was doing.

"*Mafiya*," a woman in the New York office speculated. "Gangsters."

"Might be nothing, might be something," said a soft-faced young man. "Does he want much money?"

"Not too much," said Marley.

"Tell him he's not worth much," the woman said.

It took Marley two afternoons to find the cramped hotel at the edges of Brighton Beach where Vladimir had a single room. The room's walls were decorated with concert notices. Ashkenazy at Lincoln Center. Yablonskaya at Brooklyn College. Kissin at Carnegie Hall. All Russians, Charles noted, all pianists.

Talking little, they drank the vodka Marley had brought; then, eyes feral, the young man brought a bottle of Georgian brandy to the table with a flourish. "Stalin drank this while he decided whom to murder," Vlad said. "I read that fact in the KGB files. He drank a lot of brandy."

"What happened to your job in journalism?"

Elbows on the table, head bent, Vlad struggled with the bottle's screw cap. Even indoors, he wore gloves. "People decided the KGB files smelled better closed. After that, I was useless. Couldn't even carry coffee to the boss. You see?" He got the cap off and it skittered across the table like a cockroach. Bottle held in both hands, he poured brandy into coffee mugs. "To your health, Charles."

"To yours. Are you following Oleg Ossovsky?"

"Who?" The thick brows rose as he pretended not to know.

"I want to warn you about Oleg. He spotted you, and he still has rough friends."

"An ideal man not to meet, then," Vladimir said.

"He has *mafiya* connections. But he's helping us." Marley said the last in an offhanded way. Their eyes met briefly.

"So Oleg is protected," Vlad said.

"Yes. I'm sorry about your hands."

Vladimir shrugged. He talked about people they had both known in Moscow, had Marley heard what had become of so and so, and Marley tried to remember faces. The more they drank, the less he remembered. Vlad told him that Melissa, the art student, had been stabbed by a mugger in London.

Marley staggered out of the tiny apartment after dawn.

Oleg Ossovsky sat in an unmarked panel truck outside a rooming house near Coney Island. He sat for a long time, but the truck was comfortable. Two burly men, made thicker by black leather and scarves, came out of the rooming house and stood beside the mouth of an alley, indifferent to the cold.

"Are those your friends?" said a CIA watcher.

"Yes, that is Vassily Kuper. The man beside him is his brother, Misha."

"Where do you go from here?" said Charles Marley, who sat beside Oleg.

"The docks. They import glass, I told you." Oleg folded his arms. "And people."

"People from where?"

"Anywhere. Mostly around the Red Sea, I think. This is worth more money than you're paying, Charles."

Depending on what the people from the Red Sea had in mind, Oleg might be right, Charles thought. But the information might also be worth much less. He had spent nights thinking about it and decided he didn't care.

"You shouldn't keep them waiting," Marley said.

"Let them freeze." Oleg huddled in his expensive topcoat. He cast a resentful look at Marley, then decided to be solicitous. "You look ill, old friend."

"No, I'm fine," Marley said.

"You should be paying me more for this," Oleg insisted. He got out on the blind side of the truck, began walking briskly as if he had just come around the corner.

The two Russians didn't notice him until he was crossing the street. Then they greeted him with hugs, and the guttural voices said they needed to confer, so the three men slipped into the alley. Neither the CIA watcher nor Marley could interpret the grunts they heard from the microphone. When the two wrestlers emerged alone from the alley, the men in the van looked at each other uncertainly. Marley said, "We'd better see." He was the first into the alley, the first to see the crumpled figure on the ice. He had seen enough dead men to know that Vlad had had time to pass the word, and the word had reached Oleg's friends. 🐦



Loved the story? Share your thoughts in The Readers Forum at www.TheMysteryPlace.com.

PAYBACK

SHIRLEY McCANN

“Is she dead?”

Jack slipped into the dark booth and flagged down a waitress. “I’m afraid so, Fred.”

Fred Owens lowered his face into his hands. “I don’t know how it happened. One minute, Molly and I were arguing, and the next thing I knew she was lying on the floor.” He glanced up. “I didn’t even touch her. She just tripped over the coffee table.”

Jack ordered a drink, then waited for the waitress to leave. “You didn’t tell anyone else about this, did you?”

Fred shook his head. “I just straightened the table and picked up in the living room, hoping she would wake up. But she didn’t.” He pulled his eyes tight as if the image was too horrifying to relive.

Jack accepted his drink from the waitress and took a sip. “Don’t worry about it, Fred. It’s all been taken care of.”

“What do you mean?”

Jack leaned forward. “I mean why should you spend your life in prison for something that was an accident?”

“It was an accident! I swear it.”

“You and I know that,” Jack said. “But the police may have other ideas. So why take the chance of spending the rest of your life paying for it?” He gulped his drink. “As long as there’s no body, there can’t be a murder.”

Fred’s eyes widened. “You got rid of the body? How? Where?”

“That’s not important,” Jack told him. “The important thing is that you won’t be arrested for murder.”

Fred exhaled and folded his arms across the table. “I don’t know how I can ever repay you.”

“That’s easy,” Jack remarked. “I did you a favor, now you’ll do a favor for me.”

“Anything. Just name it.”

“Kill my wife.”

Fred gasped. “You’re kidding.”

“I’m not kidding.”

"But why? Marge has already filed for divorce. She'll be out of your life soon enough."

"With half of everything I've worked hard for during our twenty-year marriage."

Fred put up his hands. "I can't do it. I'm no murderer!"

"But you are, Fred," Jack reminded him. "And if it weren't for me, you'd be facing a murder charge."

"Is she dead?"

Fred slid into the booth and lowered his head into his hands. "She's dead."

Jack expelled a long breath. "How did you do it?"

Fred rubbed both hands down his long, haggard face. "I almost couldn't go through with it," he told Jack. "But when I went home and realized what you'd done for me, I knew I had to repay you." He glanced up, meeting Jack's gaze. "The police will think she was shot during a burglary."

Jack slid back against the booth. "You did the right thing, Fred. Now we can both put this ugly mess behind us."

"Is she dead?"

Crossing the motel room, Jack scooped Molly into his arms and twirled her in the air. "She's dead."

Molly released herself from Jack's grip and pirouetted across the room. "I can't believe how easy this was. You were right about everything. When I told Fred I was leaving him for another man, he went crazy. For a minute, I thought he might really kill me. But as soon as he started coming at me, I pretended to fall over the coffee table. I stayed on the floor until he left."

Jack pulled her close and kissed her. "You did great."

"I'm just glad it's over," she said. "I was so nervous, I had to pour myself a drink just to calm my nerves until you arrived."

Jack laughed. "Well, it's done. Once I get home and discover the body of my dear wife, it will be just a matter of time before you and I live happily ever after on Marge's life insurance."

"What about Fred?" Molly asked, her eyebrows drawn. "What if he talks?"

"He won't. He can't go to the police without implicating himself."

"You're alive!" Jack stood in his living room, shocked and angered at seeing his wife standing upright. "If Fred were here now, I could kill him with my bare hands," he screamed.

Marge poured herself a drink. "Too late. Fred's dead."

Jack stared. "You killed him? Why?"

"To frame you and Molly, of course. I've known about the two of you for months." She sipped her drink. "The way I see it, now you'll have to give me everything. And if you don't, I'm going to the police and have you arrested for Fred's murder."

"The police aren't stupid. They'll figure out who really did it."

"Maybe," Marge said. "But are you willing to take that chance? After all, you're the one sleeping with his wife."

"She's alive?"

Jack nodded.

"But Fred killed her." Molly slumped against the bed.

"Well, apparently he bungled the job. But Fred's dead."

"Fred's dead? Who killed him?"

Jack's eyes misted as he produced a gun. "I'm afraid you did, Molly."

Molly backed away. "You can't be serious. We love each other."

"But I love my freedom more. It's the only way, Molly. The police will think you killed Fred, then took your own life in a murder-suicide."

As soon as Jack pulled the trigger he heard the pounding on the door.

"Open up! Police!"

"You're alive?"

Fred stood beside Marge outside the jail cell. "That's right, Jack. I knew you had set me up as soon as I returned to the house after you supposedly removed Molly's body. That's when I noticed a wineglass on the table with Molly's lipstick on it. Since I had cleaned the living room before I called you, I realized Molly couldn't have been dead."

"So we set you up using your own plan," Marge added. "After twenty years, I knew you'd kill Molly if it meant saving your own neck. As soon as you left the house, we followed you, and then called the police."

Marge wrapped her arm around Fred. "Once we collect Molly's life insurance, Fred and I will be living in luxury."

Jack pulled his eyebrows together. "So you two are . . . ?"

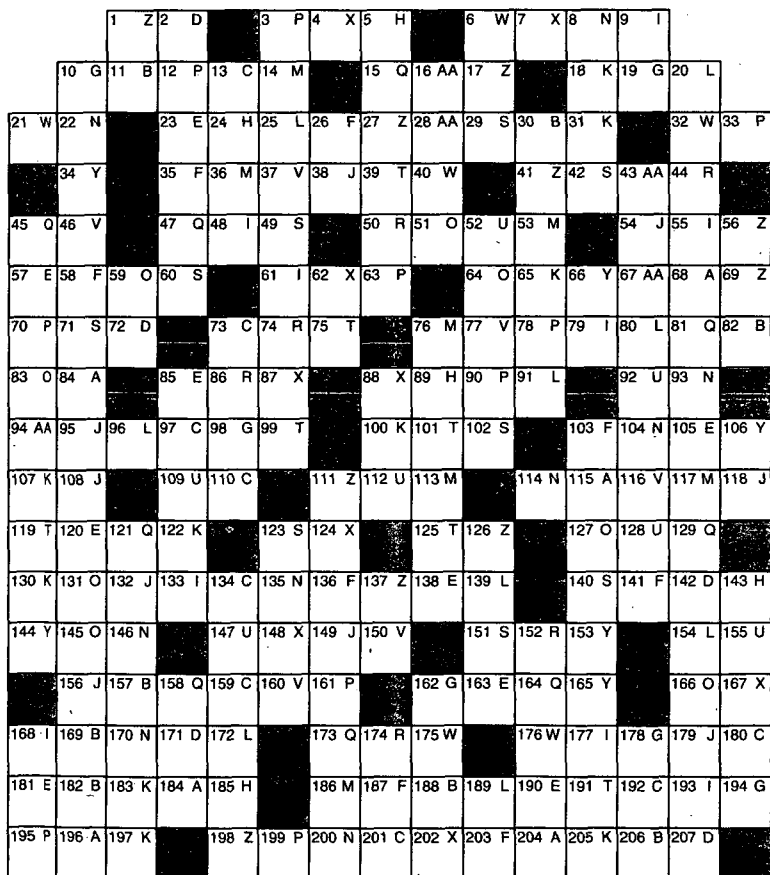
Fred kissed Marge's cheek. "That's right, Jack. And to think, we owe it all to you. I don't know how we'll ever repay you." 🐾

DYING WORDS



ACROSTIC BY JACQUELINE E. MATHEWS

Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram indicates the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a quotation. The initial letters of the words in the right-hand column spell out the name of the author and the work from which the quote was taken. The solution will appear in the March issue. The solution to last month's puzzle is on page 236.



DEFINITIONS

WORDS

A. Cure

204 184 196 84 115 68

B. Testudinate creature	206	169	11	188	157	182	82	30	
C. In operation	192	110	73	134	180	201	97	159	13
D. Confused	2	142	171	72	207				
E. Form filler	138	105	57	190	120	23	85	163	181
F. Under usual circumstances	187	203	141	26	103	58	35	136	
G. Musteline members	162	194	178	10	19	98			
H. Viscous lumps	143	5	24	89	185				
I. Words of reciprocal action	177	61	193	133	55	9	48	79	168
J. Chokers, e.g.	118	179	132	38	108	149	54	95	156
K. Was on the fence	183	107	18	205	122	197	130	100	65 31
L. Touch up	189	25	154	91	80	139	20	96	172
M. "— Off," comedy	76	36	186	14	117	113			
N. Predominant	170	114	104	22	200	146	93	8	135
O. Was enfeebled	166	51	83	127	59	131	145	64	
P. Particular	199	33	161	12	78	70	63	195	3 90
Q. Amuse	173	81	15	45	164	158	121	47	129
R. 1947 gumshoe debut	174	152	50	44	74	86			
S. One treated differently	102	60	151	49	140	29	123	42	71
T. Jet-propulsion pioneer	75	101	125	119	99	191	39		
U. Most in	128	109	112	92	155	52	147		
V. Choral groups	77	37	150	160	116	46			
W. Became indistinct	176	32	21	6	175	40			
X. Not in the pink	202	62	167	87	88	4	124	148	7
Y. To wit	153	34	66	106	144	165			
Z. Made with materials at hand	111	56	137	41	1	198	27	126	17 69
AA. Trachea's locale	28	16	94	43	67	53			

KILLER'S BRAND

JEFFRY SCOTT

Melanie Skeets arrived at the mini-mall minutes before the killing, in nice time to settle into a ringside seat and take a few sips of white wine.

The new shopping mall was a ring of sorts, albeit a broken one. It formed rather more than a half circle, two floors high, starting and ending at the main street opposite a London underground station. The sweep was punctured in the middle by a short passage to the minor street beyond.

To the left of the archway was a supermarket, the rest of the circle held a cafe and wine bar, a members-only gym, and a ticket agency, with more stores entered from the passageway. Outside the wine bar were scattered light metal chairs, and on a fine day there were few better spots for people-watching in comfort.

The arena held by the building's outstretched arms wasn't cluttered with the usual benches, litter bins, and concrete planters. The architect had decreed a textured surface with cobblestone stripes, colored brick swirls, and ribbed tile walkways, suggesting a giant pinwheel frozen as it whirled. Melanie Skeets often wondered why all that didn't look a mess, but somehow it worked and was fun.

Mrs. Skeets looked at and appreciated the world rather than just seeing it. Often she thought it a shame that so few people using the mall noticed what passed beneath their feet, or understood that its patterns and materials weren't random.

Ninety yards wide, the pinwheel seldom seemed crowded, although pedestrian traffic was constant. People hurried into the supermarket, others left less speedily, lugging plastic bags. Something about the newness of the half circle persuaded some to detour from the main street and stroll beside the arc before going on their way.

Busy, busy, Mrs. Skeets mused smugly. She'd retired recently and dawdling in the middle of the day still had a taste of playing truant. Where were they all going, and why?



Silly, she scolded herself immediately, use your eyes, half of them are shopping and most of the rest are on lunch break.

The talkers were good value. Right arms raised in permanent salute—unless they were left handed, of course—they sleepwalked hither and thither over the arena, chattering on mobile phones. Mrs. Skeet's game was to guess what kind of conversation was in progress: business, romantic, or domestic. One had about twenty seconds to pick up messages of body language and facial expression, then the target was out of sight.

The pretty girl there, hair with a raven's wing sheen—goodness, those *heels*, she was living dangerously, given the cobblestones and furrowed tiles—was fending off an unwanted date. No question about it, from her *yeah yeah whatever* toss of the head as she snapped the phone shut and passed on.

Such a minx, and good luck to her. Melanie Skeets nearly giggled aloud. Amusement gave way to a frown. She was trying to pin down a what-is-wrong-with-this-picture query at the back of her mind.

Then it came to her. More passersby were talking on mobile phones than walked in silence. The scene was not *wrong*, simply different. If we had seen that when I was a kid, and I'm not that old, we'd have assumed they were funny in the head, she mused. And the notion of phoning on the hoof without trailing miles of wires—science fiction.

Now it was so commonplace that if she mentioned her mild wonder she would be called silly or a perceiver of the obvious. All the same, animated conversation with one's hand, as it looked like at a glance, was rather strange.

This time the giggle escaped Melanie. Any poor soul drawing suspicious glances by talking to himself in the street could achieve instant normality by pressing a matchbox, cigarette pack, or whatever to their ear.

Four minutes before the killing, Melanie Skeets smiled at her whimsy and returned to the game. Several talkers were easily pigeonholed, but a youngish man baffled her despite being in range for longer than average.

She could not see much of his face, though it left an impression. An El Greco face, she thought vaguely, dark pits for eyes and an aura of intensity as he prowled the same few square yards near the main street. The phone rode at his temple but his lips seldom moved. Melanie surmised that he was being passed from department to department with increasingly unwelcome results—no basis for her hunch, merely empathy. That morning had been

spent trying to get sense out of her bank and cursing the robot voices shunting her around.

Melanie heard an automatic door sigh open behind her. The gym was next to the wine bar, and the man who'd just emerged was drenched in aftershave. Not the cheap stuff, either, but too much was too much, and she took against him on the spot. A large brute, hair damp from the shower, radiating arrogance and power. Moneyed, they usually were, with gold winking on a thick wrist and fingers. *No class, hits first and asks afterwards*, she accused.

Over there on the main street a stretch limo pulled up. *Bet it has come for him. Just his style, the jerk.* Avoiding eye contact while the object of disapproval paused at her elbow, Melanie caught a sidelong flash of designer-stubbled chin jerking at the limo. Doors opened and three men obeyed the summons, one waiting by the car, the others marching forward.

Villains, Mrs. Skeets diagnosed with weary distaste. Running an East End pub had taught her to pick out professional criminals and most varieties of policemen on sight.

Refusing to take any more notice of the crew, she saw that Bad News Man was making for the archway. The phone was still at his ear; evidently he had got through at last because he was talking hard and his free hand was chopping the air for emphasis.

The noise was sharp and a freak of acoustics in the arena brought out its special quality—not particularly loud, but indefinitely out of place. It was an ugly rip in the everyday fabric of traffic sounds, voices, and occasional snatches of trills and tunes from those pervasive phones.

Pigeons erupted from the gym's roof. Mrs. Skeets started violently and spilled wine on her dress. People halted or missed a stride, staring around for the source. The large man reeking of cologne was halfway to the limo, and Melanie had the confused impression that he'd flinched an instant before anybody else reacted, which made no sense.

Suddenly he was falling like a tree, the bodyguards, one kneeling beside the casualty, were shouting and pointing wildly.

Only the unhappy young phonetalker whom Melanie Skeets had pitied was immune to the disturbance. By the set of dark-suited shoulders, misery made him oblivious to anything short of a crack of thunder.

His head turned toward the limo, where his cronies were dancing in indecision, the kneeling thug shouted, "They shot him!" That started a panicked rush for cover.

Melanie Skeets stayed right where she was. Courage didn't come into it; she was stunned by a revelation. She understood that she had not observed events but interpreted what she was seeing. *Conned myself, me and my empathy. What a daft article I can be.*

She hoped the police would show up soon. There was urgent need to speak to them. More to the point, she hoped that one of them would listen to her.

The dead man was Ernest "Tasty Ernie" Balch, an abrasive and highly successful dealer in drugs, pornography, and prostitutes. He hadn't set out to diversify, but one thing had led to another.

Success, as ever, brought personal and professional enemies, both groups noted for vengefulness and contempt for law and human life alike. Two years before working out and then using too much aftershave, Tasty Ernie survived an assassination attempt, but chance favored him. No way should he have got out alive, but the gunman's revolver snagged on its journey from the shoulder holster, and his target's reflexes were excellent. Balch ducked the bullet, and ran for his life, literally—those gym sessions had not been in vain.

It's an ill wind that blows nobody good. The fiasco (in the hit man's jaundiced view) spurred Mr. Balch to review and tighten up security. In vain, admittedly, but at least he'd tried.

Meanwhile, the police reacted with unusual rapidity and verve. The chief investigating officer took the shotgun option and hauled in dozens of Tasty Ernie Balch's rivals, associates, and even a few ambiguous friends.

Among them was Nigel Crane—a name generating cruel mirth, but that was much later. Crane's detention was striking proof of police unfairness and the truth of the Cockney adage, "All coppers are bastards." He was arrested in a departure lounge at Heathrow Airport, exactly forty minutes after Mrs. Skeets and many, many others heard the fatal shot.

"You *are* joking. What is this? Can't I even go on holiday anymore?"

"Sorry, Nige." The detective constable was an old acquaintance and courtesy costs nothing. Crane was dodgy but always good for a drink. "Can't be helped, orders from God Almighty. We both know it's stupid but try telling *them* that, eh?" The killing had gone down at the far side of London hardly half an hour ago.

Unless Crane owned one of those James Bond jet packs, he couldn't have reached the airport so quickly. Well, slight exaggeration . . . if Crane had a motorbike waiting behind the new mall he might just have managed it.

Leafing through a girlie magazine in the departure lounge, Nigel Crane had looked serene and a trifle bored, not like a windswept, nearly-bought-it-twice-and-that-was-just-the-first-mile rider or pillion passenger. If he had covered over twenty traffic-heavy miles from the crime scene in just about as many minutes, then he *deserved* a vacation for nerve.

But he hadn't done anything like that, the detective was positive. It was Give a Dog a Bad Name syndrome. There were persistent rumors that Crane was a hit man. Informers alleged it, although they couldn't provide a scrap of proof. "My own silly fault," he had conceded on one occasion, while admitting petty fraud. "I used to tell birds fairy tales to impress 'em. There's a certain type that is right morbid, blood on your hands really turns them on. Some day, I'll grow up and learn sense."

That had the ring of truth, the detective constable considered. "Somebody will look at the times and do their sums, and you will be on your way, no danger."

"I'm having a pants year all round, mate. *Beyond* pants, I can't win for losing. Been saving for ages to go to Rio—see Carnival and die, isn't that the saying?"

"Naples is see it and die. Rio, I been there and it's overrated. Hot and cold running pickpockets and the Sugarloaf, what is that about? It's a hill, be still my heart."

"You're just saying that to make me feel better about missing the trip." Nigel Crane smiled wanly. "Appreciate it."

"Melanie Skeets," says the detective inspector whom she had cornered that day, "was a very good witness and a bloody awful one.

"She couldn't describe the man she *guessed* had been the shooter. She kept on about El Greco, whoever he was—the shooter didn't look like him, he just put her in mind of some bygone oil painter. 'I will recognize him if I see him,' she went. Which she did, no hesitation. Dead fair ID parade too—all were the same general type, and several could have doubled for Nigel Crane if you only knew him by sight."

Our Inspector, a helpful label given the number of officers involved, admits that Melanie Skeets's outlandish theory

attracted him because it accounted for the unaccountable. He was all for that.

"Three guys were watching Balch on his way from the gym to the car, right? Him, and everybody around him. All three minders insisted the shot came out of thin air. The killer had to have used a long gun, a rifle, from the gym roof or one of the tower blocks on the street behind.

"They were wrong. Balch was killed by a .38 round fired at just about point-blank range. Impossible, the muscle reckoned. Nobody close to their boss had a gun out, or pulled a gun. They'd have seen that, it was exactly what they were alert for, right? They weren't lying or covering up, either. They loved the guy—no accounting for taste—they'd wanted to keep him alive and they had been heads-up all the while.

"These weren't standard witnesses, the kind of civilians who walk round in a daze and will tell you rubbish. Like I said, they'd had their eyes peeled, and they were adamant that nobody at ground level could have shot Big Eddie.

"Then up pops our Mel and what she proposes is this: The shooter had the piece out ready, all along. Little .38 snubnosed held vertically by the side of his head. A guy has a small, dark object up to his lughole, deeply suspicious, what *can* he be up to? Calling a bookie, telling lies to his wife, asking for train times is what. Nothing suspicious, is the short answer; he's on the phone, what else?

"Nigel Crane walks past Tasty Eddie, shoots him just above the ear, whips the revolver back into phone mode and walks on, talking to the piece. 'That has to be it,' Melanie Skeets said. 'It didn't sink in till he'd gone through that archway. *He never looked round when there was that bang.* He was the only one expecting it. The only one who knew what it was.' "

The inspector was less impressed than Mrs. Skeets had expected him to be. He believed that she had produced a viable explanation. Sadly, 'That has to be it,' falls short of the standard demanded by the Crown Prosecution Service. Mrs. Skeets was honest: at no stage of the incident had she seen a weapon rather than a mobile phone.

Belatedly she recognized that El Greco's gesturing left hand had been a conjuror's ploy to divert attention from what his other hand cradled as he left the corpse behind. An ingenious theory, and it might even be valid. The not-looking-round thing was persuasive—but it wasn't evidence.

Melanie Skeets was positive that she knew better, although as

she had feared, nobody took her seriously. Not at first, that is. Assertive in her quiet way, she got a hearing in the end.

That might have been the end of it; the inspector took her name and address without troubling her for a formal statement. If a prime suspect emerged, then she would be asked to attend an identification parade.

As for the rest—cute idea, the woman had a vivid imagination, don't call us . . .

Sadly for Nigel Crane, his bad luck persisted.

There was, as has been stated, a platoon of reluctant visitors to police stations across Southeast London. Most demanded legal representation before uttering so much as "No comment." Not any old first-cab-off-the-rank brief neither, but 'their' Mr. So-and-so, who took time to respond.

Our Inspector was dealing with the potential witnesses at the crime scene. He was ready to clock off when Inspector B drew him aside to beg a massive favor.

Inspector B had investigated the violent removal of a costly watch from the wrist of a minor yet delectable Hollywood actress in London for an awards ceremony. She had agreed to have dinner with him that evening. "There's only a couple of faces left at Harvest Green. It's just round the corner, you'll be home in an hour. These are Couldn't-Possibles, just give 'em a spin and kick 'em out the door . . ."

Reading the paperwork at the Harvest Green police station, Our Inspector decided that Inspector B hadn't been kidding. Somebody seemed to be using Tasty Eddie Balch's demise as pre-text for hassling the opposition.

Nigel Crane was a glaring example. A scrawled note from the copper who had picked him up at the airport confirmed that the man's ticket to Brazil had been booked months in advance. Somebody had spotted the wretch checking in, asked if there was any interest, and bang went Nigel Crane's vacation.

His reputation as hit man had been enough for the chief investigating officer. The CIO wasn't riding off in all directions, but he was pulling in bad citizens from as many compass points.

Noting that Crane had waived legal representation, Our Inspector started with him to get the dross out of the way. Nigel Crane told his sad story of Paradise Lost, Copacabana Beach anyway, and Our Inspector, heartless fellow, sniggered, "You shouldn't tell lies to the girlies if you can't take a joke, killer."

"Very droll," Nigel Crane groaned. Restless in the hard chair, he

smoothed his hair. Wincing, he pulled his hand away and switched to tapping his feet. "What?"

Our Inspector was studying him raptly. "Nasty place on your face, you need some ointment on that, my son."

"S'nothing, razor burn."

"But first," Our Inspector continued as if Crane had not spoken, "we'll get that injury photographed, have the doc take a look. Doesn't look like razor burn to me."

Nigel Crane swallowed once. "I want my brief."

"No sooner asked than granted." Yet Our Inspector kept inspecting Crane's face. "I know you slotted Balch, and now that that's established, the rest is routine. The only way you got to the airport that quick is on a motorbike, and something tells me you aren't into them. You paid somebody for the ride, probably a courier who knows all the shortcuts. And probably a mate of yours, so he'd ask no questions. That cuts the candidate list down."

"I want my brief."

"When your mate is looking at joining you on a murder charge it will loosen his tongue a treat. Tell me I'm wrong . . ."

Nigel Crane remained unhappily mute.

"We'll find your ride, depend on it. What with traffic control, speed cameras, cameras monitoring the buses-only lanes, and a load more watching for terrorists, you'll have been a right little film star. We'll run all the tapes, look for a bike with two aboard, one in a dark suit—nowhere to change near the mall and you were in a hurry anyway, so you changed at the airport before checking in.

"The rider will get out from under at the speed of light, swear he didn't know what was going on, all he did was give you a lift from the mall maybe ninety seconds after the shooting. And there's a corker of an eyewitness can place you there, right next to Balch when he went down."

Nigel Crane couldn't resist venting his feelings. "That many cameras, you reckon? I said it in the car coming here and I say it again, this year has been pants for me." Then he folded his arms and fell glumly silent again.

"Melanie Skeets worked it out perfectly," Our Inspector gloats. "Crane walked past Eddie Balch, slotted him and kept going, 'on the phone' again. What he didn't reckon on was this: The passage of a bullet heats up a revolver barrel something cruel. Even a short barrel. "Nigel has skin a girl would envy—ultra sensitive. When I saw the nasty new burn near his earlobe, from putting the gun up against it again and talking away, it was Game Over.

"None of the traffic or security camera coverage had caught him en route to Heathrow, by the way. We had enough, though. He wore transparent gloves for the hit but a dark suit and white shirt were recovered from a washroom bin at the airport, and there was gunshot residue on the shirt and jacket sleeves. Nothing to connect Crane to the clothing bar his DNA traces, pardon my sarcasm . . .

"His defending brief could tell they were on a hiding to nothing, didn't contest the evidence, and went all-out on the mitigation speech: 'A tragedy for the defendant as much as the victim, both casualties of society.' It sounded good but the jury didn't quite agree. They conferred for, oh, all of forty minutes. Not quite as fast as his trip to the airport, but close. Guilty as charged."

At which point—in hindsight one understands that he had been working up to it, chortling inwardly for minutes—Our Inspector produces his treasured and excruciating pun, polished by frequent use.

"It was enough to make a man religious, clocking that redness on his skin. You could say our Nigel bore the mark of Crane." ♣

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
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From "The Adventure of the Dancing Men" (1903)

—Arthur Conan Doyle

It was he who invented that writing, which would pass as a child's scrawl unless you just happened to have the key to it.

BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

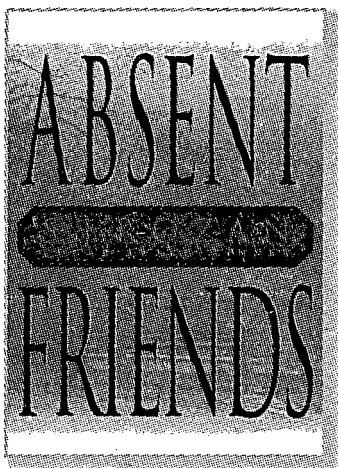
An established author offers a compelling take on 9/11; a Grand Master is at the top of her form; and an award-winning writer returns after a decade's hiatus.

S. J. Rozan, creator of the award-winning Lydia Chin/Bill Smith novels, delivers **ABSENT FRIENDS** (Delacorte, \$24), a stunning stand-alone novel that combines a sensitive use of the national tragedy of 9/11 with an intricate puzzle rooted in the past.

Absent Friends examines the tight bonds of a group of children growing up in Pleasant Hills on Staten Island, and the impact that time and two cataclysmic events have on those bonds. The seven kids—Tom, Jack, Markie, and Jimmy, the boys; Marian, Sally and Vicky, the girls—grow up together in the tumultuous '60s and '70s, hanging out, pairing up (some), breaking up (some), and growing up (most) to fill the role fate seemed to have always meant for them. For Jimmy McCaffery that was to become a fireman hero. A role he filled early and often.

Jimmy was the third of the group to die. If the earlier deaths and their aftermath tangled the lives of them all, Jimmy's death is the catalyst that will shatter their worlds completely. When Harry Randall, a Pulitzer prize-winning reporter, well past his glory days, begins a series of stories about the heroes of 9/11, he includes Captain James (Jimmy) McCaffery, who is such a symbol of heroism that the McCaffery Memorial Fund quickly becomes one of the largest. But Randall's reporting uncovers another story as well, as details of Jimmy's life reveal some strange financial arrangements. With consummate skill, Rozan alternates between past and present, shifting viewpoints frequently and employing a narrative distance that somehow makes her story all the more effective.

Most impressive of all are the large and small ways that the



events of that day indelibly color every aspect of the novel without ever appearing obtrusive or unnatural. Rozan's success in conveying the sights, sounds, smells, colors, and emotional range of post-9/11 is journalistic genius and it is artfully married to storytelling art of the first rank.

Ruth Rendell's prolific imagination has fueled more than fifty novels and earned her the highest mystery awards of both England and the United States. She will be fondly remembered for her Chief Inspector Wexford mysteries (approaching twenty), her more gothic books written as Barbara Vine, and for her more than two dozen stand-alone novels and short story collections. Together her entire oeuvre makes her one of the most prolific, versatile, and accomplished writers of our time.

Rendell's ability to create and reveal complex psychological portraits is on full display in her latest stand-alone effort, *THE ROTTWEILER* (Crown, \$25). This novel features a serial killer, whose identity is revealed to the reader long before anyone else figures it out, so the reader is free to focus on a core set of intriguing but oblivious and colorfully self-absorbed characters: the resident owner of an antique store, the tenants of the apartments above it, and their immediate circle. Shopkeeper and landlady Inez spends her non-working time obsessing over the mystery films her late husband had starred in. Her shopkeeping assistant, the exotic Zeinab, easily persuades admirers to give her expensive gifts or customers to purchase white elephants. Other characters include Will, the handsome but slow young man who keeps to himself aside from his visits to and from his Aunt Becky, and the oft-married Ludmilla with the wandering accent and her boyfriend and virtual resident, Freddy. And then there's the mysterious Jeremy Quick.

An apparent serial killer is at work in the area and has been christened the "Rottweiler" because the first victim that was found had a bite mark on her neck. The name stuck even though the bite wasn't the killer's—one of many little ironies from the author. The killer does have a quirk, though—removing some little memento from each victim. It is Inez's misfortune that more than one of the mementos is found among her sale items, attracting the police and unwanted attention.

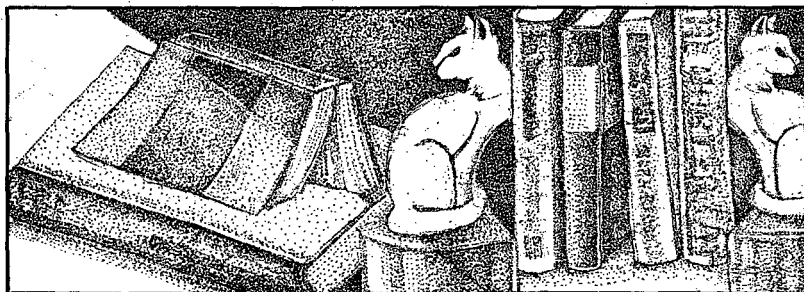
Rendell's astute probing of her characters and the tension that develops as suspicion and false leads upset the fragile balance of their lives is enthralling. Although the reader knows who the killer is, the identity of the next victim and the resolution is artfully disguised and skillfully revealed.

Edgar and Shamus award-winner Benjamin M. Schutz, author of the much-admired Leo Haggerty P.I. series (*Embrace the Wolf*), has been absent from the publishing lists for ten years, but now he explodes back into print with a tight, jarring stand-alone, **THE MONGOL REPLY** (Five Star, \$25.95).

This shattering thriller thrusts the reader into a brutal situation where the violence is both physical and emotional. Ex-pro football player Tom Tully, who once killed another player with a vicious (but legal) hit, is now a special teams coach for a pro team. Convinced that his wife, Serena, is cheating on him, Tully sets out to destroy her, and like a good football player, he prepares a plan, then sets out to execute it with cruel efficiency.

The combination of legal and extra-legal maneuvers Tully employs is breathtaking in the amount of pain, humiliation, and emotional trauma delivered to an already fragile target, not to mention the inconceivable damage to their two young children. The game is almost a rout until court-appointed specialist Morgan Reece enters the picture. Although Reece must be neutral in his role of evaluator, he is able to offer some advice that points Serena in the right direction. A retired domestic relations lawyer, Lou Carlson, is quick to step in and, for a time, succeeds in leveling the playing field. Schutz ratchets up the tension with a series of moves and counter-moves that leaves the reader emotionally drained yet still unprepared for the searing climax.

Welcome back Mr. Schutz!



DARK EYES

R. T. LAWTON

“**A**rmenian, come with me. The Russian requests your presence.”

I left off sorting the bright silk scarves the southern traders had brought in the day before and glanced up. The schoolteacher for the Tereski Cossack Regiment stood in the doorway of my hut, a hut that I had rented on a previous trip for my business here. During the few other times I'd seen the teacher, he had carried himself with the air of authority, but on this early morning he seemed perturbed over some weighty matter that occupied his mind. Ah, those sorts of things were for the local officials to handle. I had no wish to meddle in the affairs of the tsar's representatives, nor to be drawn into them. I was merely a seller of goods in this foreign land.

“If His Honor wishes a silver dagger from Turkey or some trinkets for the village girls, then pray let him come here. I cannot carry my entire shop around on my back.”

The regimental schoolteacher cast a hard gaze on me.

“He doesn't wish to buy.”

“Then what does he want with me?” I asked.

In answer, the schoolteacher grabbed my elbow and hurried me out into the yard.

“I can't tell you much for now, he only said to bring you.”

I yelled over my shoulder for the Nogay boy whose sun-browned face displayed the stolid features of his Mongol forebears. The youth had somehow attached himself to me in the last year and found ways to assist in my trading concern. In return, I fed him and taught him the business. But for right now, I wanted him out on the front steps with an eye on the goods. If anyone came to buy, he should tell them to come back in the late afternoon after the Cossack girls drove the cattle through the main gate and into the yards of their owners. I should return by then and have everything ready for sale.

The schoolteacher led me up the wide dirt street, past the

wattle fences that enclosed every Cossack yard, with its hut set up on posts a few feet above the ground. A dirt embankment then surrounded each hut. Few people were about the village at this time of day. Most of the Cossack men were out on expeditions against the Chechens or stood guard at one of the cordons along the brown waters of the Terek River sweeping down from the snowy Caucasus. As for the women, they worked in the vineyards with the ripening black grapes or else kept an eye on the cattle in the fields.

Along our way, the schoolteacher spoke very little other than to say that something of importance had happened during the night, something upon which the Russian staff captain wished to consult with me. Further than that he wouldn't explain, even though I tried to draw him out with small talk.

"Where are we going?"

"To my second house."

"The one that you rented to the staff captain after he and his orderly were quartered on you by the army?"

The schoolteacher glanced at me, then seemed to ignore my presence as much as possible under the circumstances. We passed two more huts before coming to his yard and entering through the arched gate.

As we approached the house, I observed the staff captain sitting calmly in a wooden chair on the front porch. His right leg was crossed over his left at the knee, and his right foot, encased in a brightly polished black leather riding boot, swung lightly back and forth. He was young, with a stern look of self-importance and a reckless black mustache. From a lit pipe in his mouth drifted white tendrils of smoke.

We were all the way up the stairs before I noticed a body—it looked like the staff captain's orderly—stretched out on the porch to the far side of the Russian officer. Judging by the knife protruding at a slant from the orderly's chest, I was fairly sure the man was dead. And recently so. But what did this have to do with me?

The Russian spoke first.

"Is this the Armenian?"

The schoolteacher nodded.

"Good. Now listen to me, Armenian. It seems your reputation precedes you in your travels. I am told that you are good at finding things that have been lost."

I had trouble taking my eyes off the dead orderly, but the Russian officer had fixed his attention on me and I had to answer.

"I've had some luck in the past. Yes, sir."

"Very well." He reached into the pocket of his scarlet Circassian coat and brought out a small stack of gold coins. Selecting one off the top, he held the coin out toward me. "This is advance payment."

Gingerly I took the coin.

"For what, Your Honor?"

"My favorite horse was stolen last night. He's a Karbada horse, sixteen hands high, with dark color and a long, low stride. I named him Karagyozy, Turkish for 'black eyes.' Find where he is and more of these coins will be yours. You would be wise not to fail me."

My gaze kept drifting back to the dead man on the porch.

The staff captain deigned to look at the limp heap lying at his doorstep.

"Whoever stole my horse also killed my orderly with his own knife. The serf I can replace, but Karagyozy is one of a kind."

"Chechens," spoke up the schoolteacher. "It was those Abreks from the Tartar side of the river. I'll tighten the cordons and see if we can catch them before they cross back."

"Not so," replied the staff captain in a dry voice. "I think it was one of your local Cossacks, and when I find him out, I will whip him, then hang him."

The schoolteacher turned away in the direction of the Caucasus Mountains off in the distance, south across the river. From the little I knew of the man, he appeared to be engaged in some inner turmoil.

To break the silence, I inquired, "What has been done so far?"

It was the Russian that answered. "My Moscow soldiers have searched every hut, shed, and yard, one at a time. Not a trace was found. But they can't hide him for long. See if you can find my Karagyozy."

I wasn't sure where to begin.

After some parting words with the Russian officer, the schoolteacher grabbed my elbow again and led me off the porch. We were through the gate and back onto the broad dirt street before I ventured a question in his direction.

"The Russian disturbs you?"

"He is a noble and is closely related to the tsar. We must be especially careful around him."

"And beyond that?"

"We Cossacks were a free people once. That's the meaning of the word *cossack* from the old *kazak*. At one time or another we successfully fought off the separate armies of Poland and of Russia

and of the Turkish sultan. In the end, we allied ourselves with Russia because they are of the same faith, Old Believers, like us. Even so, they squeezed us tight. But after we Cossacks lost the rebellion, Moscow took away many of our freedoms. Now we have Russian troops quartered in every village. They pollute our homes with pipe smoke and treat us like underlings."

I pondered his statements and wondered.

"You dislike the Russians, but they are your allies. And your Cossacks dress like Chechen braves, yet you fight these same Chechens across the river."

"In the beginning, our Cossacks intermarried with the hill tribes. We respected the Chechens and adopted their dress, but today's politics demand that we fight against them."

These machinations of governments were not my concern, except as possible pieces to the puzzle of a crime. Personally, I wanted nothing more than to trade with both the Cossacks on this side of the river *and* the hill tribes on the far bank of the Terek. Now I found myself dragged into the middle. And I had the feeling that neither the Russian nor the schoolteacher had told me everything.

At the next intersection of dirt streets, the schoolteacher left me alone with my thoughts, not even a farewell, just a meaningful glance that I couldn't interpret.

I stood in the dusty road, wanting to return to my unpacked trade goods, but the gold coin in my pocket said I had to look for a stolen horse. The best person I knew for information in this village was Daddy Eroshka, a giant Cossack with a long white mane and full beard. Most of his time was spent hunting and fishing, the rest in drinking parties with the Cossack girls where he heard all the latest gossip. He'd be the one.

I found him still asleep in the back of his two-room hut. The walls of the bigger room in front were covered with brass basins, weapons, fishing nets, drying animal skins, and a couple of blankets. On the floor under a wooden bench rested pumpkins and melons. Three hunting dogs lay on a pile of rags in the far corner. In the back room, amongst rugs and bedding, sat a well-worn camp bed where the old man lay snoring. His musket stood against the nearest wall. I gently shook his shoulder.

His eyes opened and fixed on me.

"What do you want so early in the morning?"

"I would like to talk with you."

"If you want me to be sociable at this time of day you will have to stand me to a pail of *chikhir*."

For myself, I too like a good wine, but with my supper—this was not yet breakfast. However, if that's what it took to loosen his tongue, then so be it.

I nodded.

Daddy Eroshka immediately sat up on the camp bed. His voice roared out into the yard. "Lukashka, come quickly. Your uncle has money for a drink."

With grimy hands, he reached under the camp bed and picked two bottles off the floor. Blowing a light film of road dust off the bottles, he held them up by their necks in one hand, then stuck out the callused palm of his other hand. It took me a minute to realize what he wanted.

As I counted out several small coins into his palm, a young boy rushed into the room. With the two bottles, the coins, and instructions to go to Auntie Ustenka's hut, the boy left in a hurry. Daddy Eroshka lay back on the bed and closed his eyes. Not sure what I was supposed to do, I waited quietly until the youngster returned. At this point, the old Cossack resurrected himself.

He handed me a cracked porcelain cup with brown streaks on the inside and made as if to pour wine into it for me. I quickly wiped it out with my sleeve. He filled my cup halfway, then he drank straight from the bottle. I noticed that the second bottle had gone under the bed, presumably for later.

He wiped his lips on the back of his sunburned hand and raised his bottle again.

"To your health, Armenian."

Having no wish to buy more wine, I began my questions.

"You hear all the gossip in the village. What have you heard about the staff captain?"

"Ah, the Russian noble, related to the tsar they say."

"Yes, that one."

"Of course. It is said that he receives a large monthly allotment from his family estates back in Russia. And it must be true because he parties with the prettiest girls, buys them sweetmeats and silver trinkets, drinks to all hours of the night, and plays their games. He lives well."

"Any problems there?"

"Not as far as the Russian himself is concerned. He favors one girl, beautiful Marushka, who carries herself like a queen. Oh, the captain spends a lot of money on her, but she is undecided. You see, sometime back, her mother spoke to the mother of one of our Cossack lads, Yermack, and the two of them were to be married some day. You should know this, our Yermack is a fine lad. After

his father was killed by the Chechens, I trained him myself to ride a horse in the Cossack way. I taught him everything he knows about horses."

"Anything else for me?"

The old man drank from the bottle again and screwed up his face as if he were trying to remember something important so I could get my money's worth.

"There's some of the other village girls, who are not as pretty as Marushka and her friends. And I hear that the staff captain's orderly sells some of the household silver bowls and cups for money to party with those girls. But then, all the Moscow soldiers quartered here flirt with the village girls, if that means anything to you."

I wasn't sure it did, but there wasn't much else the old man seemed willing to give up. I thanked him and left. Out on the broad street, my stomach complained about how high the sun had risen in the sky, which settled the matter of priorities.

Back at my hut, I brewed tea, munched on a piece of bread, and mulled circumstances over in my head. Marushka herself probably wouldn't talk to me about Yermack, but maybe one of the other girls would . . . especially if I had something to offer.

Once again, I left the shop in the hands of my Nogay helper and walked up the main street. This time I continued out the village gate and less than a verst up the road to the vineyards. Lowing of the oxen that pulled the grape-laden carts, interspersed with the voices of the girls calling out to each other, rose above the dusty vines.

Eventually, I found one of Marushka's friends. She was cutting bunches of the sugar black grapes and piling them into an ox cart.

"Good morning, Bela. How is the harvest?"

She paused to wipe the sweat off her handsome face.

"Armenian, you've come to help me."

"No, no, I merely wished to talk."

Immediately, she returned to cutting the next bunch of grapes.

"No time to gossip. I have work to do."

I whisked a bright yellow silk scarf from out of my sleeve and dangled it in front of her face.

She stopped cutting and looked at the scarf, then me, then back to the scarf. Cleaning her hands on the hem of her smock, she reached for the yellow silk.

I let her have one end.

"Tell me about the Russian and Marushka," I said.

"Oh that." Bela laughed. "That's nothing. The captain buys all of

us sweetmeats and silver locket, but he wants only Marushka for his 'little soul,' his mistress."

"And what does Yermack say about that?"

Bela's smile faded.

"In front of Marushka, he pretends it doesn't matter. He laughs and says there are plenty of other beautiful women in the next village to love him, so what does he care."

"Do you believe him?"

"Not really."

"Why not?"

She puckered up one cheek.

"Because in private he mutters that the Russian stole something he loved away from him, and therefore he will steal away something that the Russian loves."

"Could that something have been a horse?"

Bela snatched the scarf out of my grasp and turned away.

"I have grapes to cut before they dry on the vine. Go ask your questions of someone else."

She was right, and I had a fair idea whom to speak with. Only this time, I would be better prepared.

In the late afternoon as the heat of the day began to cool, I was seated on Daddy Eroshka's porch, waiting for his return. Down the street he trudged, with still-wet nets thrown back over his shoulder, his naked back carrying the weight of both fish and equipment. A pelt of snowy white hair covered his massive chest and he walked barefoot with his pants legs rolled up to his knees.

I knew he saw me sitting there on his porch, but he ducked his head as if to give himself time to consider what business I might have with him now. His whistling stopped, but his outward appearance seemed cheerful enough as he came up the steps.

"Armenian, you've come back to me."

He unslung the nets and dropped them onto the porch.

I held up the small pail of vodka I'd had the foresight to bring along this time.

His voice boomed.

"And you've brought me a present. We may become *kunaks*, yet. Yes, we may become very good comrades."

Using the only drink container in the hut, I scooped up some of the vodka and held the cup out to him. He toasted my health, downed the liquid in two swallows, and returned the empty porcelain. This time, after refilling the cup, I held it in sight, but made no proffer.

"You forgot to tell me about the horse. But then it was early

morning when I came to your hut, and it's possible that you were still groggy from your sleep."

He stared at the vodka.

"Which horse is that?"

"The Karbada horse that belonged to the staff captain, the one that Yermack stole. As I recall, it was you that taught Yermack everything he knows about horses."

The old Cossack had a troubled look on his face.

"I wish no evil on the lad. He is a brave one like the Cossacks in my youth."

"There will be no worries from me. I will only speak with Yermack and then he can do whatever he wishes."

I extended the cracked porcelain halfway.

Daddy Eroshka's large hand wrapped around the cup of vodka, but I wasn't ready to let it go yet.

"I've heard rumors," he said at last, "that a dark-colored Karbada horse, much like the staff captain's, might be found tethered in the dense woods along the Terek."

I released my grasp.

"And when will Yermack come to the village again from the cordon?"

The old Cossack eyed the pail of vodka on the floor at my feet.

"Tonight," he replied, "at sunset. Some of the girls are having a party and he will be there."

I handed him the pail and left.

By early evening, I had stationed myself by the main village gate. The girls in their *beshmets* and smocks with their hair tied up in colored kerchiefs had already herded the cattle through the gate and into the yards. All the ox carts with their loads of black grapes had also come home. I'd seen Marushka with her long black hair, bold figure, and dark eyes, and knew why both the Cossack lad and the Russian captain sought her affections. Now I waited for Yermack.

As the sun began to set, a young rider on a gray horse came down the road. He wore a tattered, light brown Circassian coat with the coat's long skirts covering down to his knees. A white cap sat back on his head like a Chechen brave. His musket was strapped to his back in a warrior's carefree manner, and it made no noise as he rode.

When the horseman approached the gate, I stepped into the road and inquired, "Yermack?"

He stopped the gray horse with its shoulder almost touching mine.

"I am. Who are you?"

"I'm a friend."

He leaned forward on his saddle.

"I know all my friends, but I think you are the Armenian trader from the south."

"I know about the Karbada horse, Karagyozy, hidden in the forest."

Yermack shrugged the musket off his shoulder and into his hands.

"You picked a poor place to die, Armenian."

"And you would be killing the wrong man."

"What do you mean?"

"I have an answer to your problems," I replied.

His countenance remained stern; there was no joy in the hard smile on his lips.

"Go on."

"First, take the Karbada horse across the river and sell him to the Chechens."

"He's an excellent horse; I will keep him."

Ah, I had forgotten the stubbornness of youth. I now reconsidered the situation before us.

"Then is there a Chechen on the other side that you trust to hide the horse for a while?"

"Yarbay Khan is my *kunak*, we've raided the horse herds of the Nogay together. He will do anything I ask."

"Good. Take the horse across the river to him tonight. Second, find an elder from the pro-Russian Chechen village near your cordon, and send the man to me at this gate just before the sun rises tomorrow. He and I will take care of the rest. Now go."

Yermack had a disappointed look on his face.

"There's a party tonight."

"You'll have several parties if we do this right. Otherwise, you may lose both of your 'dark eyes' to the staff captain."

He brandished his musket. A frown creased his forehead.

"I would gladly shoot that Russian right off his porch, but then I would become an outlaw with no village, no family."

His horse stood motionless for a while before Yermack spoke again.

"Maybe I will try your way this one time."

Reining his horse partway around, he suddenly stopped, his head turning back in my direction.

"You and I have not known each other that well. Why do you do this for me?"

"I have an inherent distrust of Turks and Russians. Besides, who

knows what the future holds, perhaps sometime you will do a favor for me."

Yermack nodded and rode off up the road toward the woods along the Terek. He had no idea how soon I might request this favor I'd mentioned, but with the manner of man we were both dealing with, I felt sure I would be in need of Yermack's services, probably within a day. There was nothing else to do now except sleep and see what the morning brought.

As the stars winked out of the fading night and the sky grew pale blue in the east, I once again stood at the main village gate.

Red streaks had covered the bottom of the distant clouds hanging on the mountaintops before I saw the old man walking out of the morning mist along the river. When he drew closer, he hailed me.

"Are you the Armenian?"

"I am. Are you the friend of Yermack?"

He greeted me in Chechen fashion. In turn, I pressed silver coins into his palm and explained his part in what we were about to do. He agreed and asked no questions.

From there, we walked to the schoolteacher's house and I roused the teacher from his morning samovar.

"We must speak with the staff captain," I said.

"He may still be sleeping," replied the teacher. "Perhaps we should wait until he stirs."

I shrugged.

"We can wait until tomorrow if it pleases you. But yesterday, the Russian noble seemed anxious to hear word about his horse. The choice is yours to make."

The schoolteacher pursed his lips.

"I see. And this is a matter of great importance?"

I assured him that it was. Also, that I needed himself and one other male as witness.

The teacher glanced at the Chechen elder, then studied my face as if he could read my mind. And perhaps he could, for he immediately sent his oldest son to get fully dressed, and bawled for his old wife to get his regimental coat ready. The one with all the medals. As he slid into his jacket, his daughter hurried forward with his black leather riding boots.

Made ready, the four of us trooped across the yard and up the steps of the second house. The staff captain must have heard the thud of the regimental schoolteacher's boot soles on the porch boards. He slung the door open and leaned insolently against the door frame.

"So much noise. Must be important."

"We know where your horse has gone." This I could say without a lie upon my lips because I had made these arrangements myself. And since the Chechen elder had come to me at dawn, I could assume that the rest of my message was true, therefore I could speak with a relatively clear conscience. I tugged on the elder's sleeve until he stood beside me on the porch. "This old man from a village across from one of the cordons has word of your Karagyo."

The village elder proceeded to relate a story of watching a Chechen Abrek ride across the Terek leading a dark-colored Karbada horse while yesterday's morning mist was still upon the water. Horses and rider then disappeared in the direction of the foothills.

The staff captain stared at me.

"How does he know it was an Abrek and not one of the local Cossacks?"

I gently prodded the old man.

"Because I saw his blue trousers; shaved head with the long tuft of hair on the right side; and his red-dyed, short-cropped beard and trimmed mustache. Truthfully, an Abrek has your horse."

This had been the easy part.

The Russian grunted his displeasure at the news.

I turned the old Chechen around and pointed him down the stairs. I had more business to conduct with the captain.

"You wished me to find your horse and I have done as you requested."

"True," replied the Russian, "but since the horse cannot be recovered, you should not expect further reward from me."

He made a shooping motion with his fingers.

With a shrug, "So be it," I turned for the stairs, but made sure I was the last to depart. When the teacher, his oldest son, and the Chechen elder were what I judged to be far enough away to hear a normal voice, yet not so close as to understand a whisper, I stepped back onto the porch.

The Russian eyed me warily.

"One more matter." I spoke in a low voice. "About your orderly . . ."

"He was obviously killed by the Abrek," interrupted the captain, also in a low volume. "The same one that stole my horse."

"No. The orderly knew his killer. No Chechen could have gotten close enough to kill him in such a manner. There was no struggle, no defensive cuts on the hands or arms, no blood splattered on the front wall of the house."

"So?"

"So the killer stood directly in front of him and thrust the orderly's own knife in an upward motion under the rib cage to reach the heart. I remember the slant of the knife in the body and the empty knife sheath. The orderly knew his killer, but didn't realize he was about to die for stealing the household silver."

A noticeable pale swept over the Russian's face. He started and quickly recovered. His voice didn't carry beyond me.

"I am kin to the tsar. Be careful about starting malicious rumors."

I glanced over my shoulder to ensure that my three witnesses waited nearby. They stood in a clump halfway across the yard, obviously wondering what was being said. That was all I required of them at the moment.

"Rumors have been known to tarnish a reputation," I replied to the captain, "but fortunately, one frequently forgets what one no longer sees."

"What do you mean?"

I held his glare.

"It is said that your regiment is going on expedition next week. Perhaps your place is now better spent at your colonel's side in regimental headquarters. With you gone from the village, *everyone* will soon forget your orderly's mishap."

We stood facing each other in the ensuing silence.

Finally, the Russian spoke again in a low murmur.

"Perhaps, you're right. I am needed by my colonel in these troublesome times. I'll ride out by noonday." He pointed his index finger at me. "But you, Armenian, are too clever by far. Take care not to be near me in the days to come. You might find you have something in common with my orderly."

With a slight bow, I left the porch and rejoined the waiting trio.

"The staff captain is leaving for his regiment," I told the teacher. "I'm afraid you will lose the six rubles he pays in rent for the second house."

The schoolteacher barely concealed a smile. His oldest son spat on the ground. We parted and I sent the Chechen elder on his way. I had one more visit to make.

Once more, I found myself in Daddy Eroshka's hut, waking the white-maned Cossack.

"Did you bring vodka or *chikhir*?" he muttered as his eyes opened.

"Not this time, my friend. But give this message directly to Yermack at the cordon and maybe he will stand you to a pail. You should tell our young Cossack friend that the Russian leaves today for his regiment. Make it known that the staff captain's route will

take him through a rough gorge where Abreks and lawless Circassians sometimes prey upon travelers. Tell Yermack this message comes from me, the Armenian. He is a smart lad and will know what to do."

Daddy Eroshka sat quietly on the camp bed for a while. Then a sly grin crept across his face.

"Armenian, you should have been a Cossack with me in the old days. What great *kunaks* we'd have been then."

At last I could get back to my trade goods. After all, trading was my business and it had long been interrupted. At least now I would soon be free to trade on both sides of the river and not have to worry about who I met on the road "in the days to come." *R*

We'd like to know what your favorite AHMM stories are

In anticipation of our fiftieth anniversary in 2006, we are asking our readers, especially our long-time subscribers, to tell us what stories over the years were the most memorable, captivating, enjoyable, or otherwise remarkable. We also invite you to contribute your comments about the stories you've particularly liked.

We'll print some of the stories from your suggestions as Mystery Classics during our anniversary year. We'll also run a selected list in the magazine, including some of your comments.

Please write to: The Editors
Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine
475 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10016

TRUE BLUE

B. K. STEVENS

Dear Grandma,

How are you? I am fine, except Dad's giving me a hard time about some dumb stuff that happened. Mom's being mean too, but she *always* gives me a hard time about stuff like this. Dad is usually cool; he just looks confused, mumbles about me making my own decisions, and finds an excuse to leave the house. Then Mom gets madder at him than at me, and I can pretty much slide past the whole thing. This time Dad's backing Mom all the way, and I don't think I can stand up to both of them. It's not fair.

Please write to him and tell him to back off. Tell him it's not nice to pressure a little kid. He'll listen to you—he always does.

Thanks for the fielder's glove. It is neat. If you straighten Dad out, maybe I'll get a chance to use it. If not, Little League might be just a memory for

Your loving grandson,
Kevin

Dear Mother,

Kevin's writing to you too to tell you what a rotten father I am. I'm guessing you'll hear from him first, since his letters are usually about a sentence long, and mine tend to be a bit longer. This time, to help you understand why I'm coming down so hard on Kevin, I'll have to tell you about the last case Bolt and I handled.

It all started Sunday morning. The minister pulled Ellen and me aside after church and said somebody had pulled a prank on Kevin's Sunday school teacher. You remember Miss Prichett—she was my Sunday school teacher too, only she's about eighty now and even meaner and skinnier than she used to be. Well, somebody put her e-mail address on a mailing list for—well, nasty stuff. You know what I mean—special Web sites and ads for gizmos that are supposed to make to make body parts bigger but probably

wouldn't work even if they *were* reasonably priced because stuff like that is pretty much physically impossible, isn't it? Hell, we get junk e-mail like that ourselves, just through our regular server. Apparently, the stuff Miss Prichett's getting is even raunchier than the stuff everybody gets. Then another teacher heard Kevin and his Little League buddies snickering, and she got the impression that one of the boys had played the joke and the others knew about it. So the minister asked us to have a talk with Kevin.

At first Kevin denied everything, but Ellen kept at him until he finally admitted one of his friends had done it. But he wouldn't say who. After all, Kevin said, he hadn't done anything wrong himself, and if he told, his friends would hate him so much for snitching that he might have to drop Little League. That, he said, wasn't fair. At the time, it seemed to me Kevin was making some good points. Feeling confused, I said he had to make his own decisions, Ellen got steamed, and then, thank goodness, the phone rang.

It was Bolt. A body had been found below Petite Falls—probably an accidental drowning, but there were “odd circumstances pertaining to the case” (that was Bolt's phrase), so could I please come? I was glad to go. A probable accidental drowning sounded like a walk in the park compared to the heavy ethical issues Ellen and Kevin were getting into. So I kissed her, hugged him, and said they could work it out any way they wanted. Ellen gave me a dirty look, but I pretended not to notice.

I found Bolt, a dozen uniforms and lab guys, and the coroner on the banks of Slushy River, just below Petite Falls. It was cold for November, and Bolt was shivering—he needs a new raincoat with a thicker lining, you should tell him that next time you write him—but there was no snow. The body had been pulled onto the bank and covered by a waterproof sheet. Bolt turned the sheet back, and I took a look. It was a girl, twenty or so, blindfolded with a pale blue silk scarf. Right away, I figured out the blindfold was one of the odd pertaining circumstances Bolt had had in mind.

“Do we know who she is?” I asked.

“Yes, sir,” Bolt said, pushing his wispy gray hair back from his face. “We found her coat neatly folded on the bank, with her purse and some other items tucked underneath. Her ID indicates she's Maggie Warren from Indianapolis, twenty-one as of last month, a sophomore at Culbert College.”

A college kid. I glanced at the coroner. “Cause of death definitely drowning?”

She glared, like she always does when I'm around. “Nothing's definite till I get her to the lab. But drowning looks right. She's got

some bumps and bruises, including two big bashes on her forehead, but nothing that couldn't be accounted for by a tumble over Petite Falls and close encounters with the rocks at the bottom. If you ask me, she tried walking across the stepping-stones above the falls, slipped, knocked herself out on the rocks, filled her lungs with water, and that was that."

I've never admitted this to you before, Mother, but you've probably always pretty much known: I've walked across those stepping-stones myself, lots of times. You always warned me not to, but jeez. It didn't seem like much of a risk—the stones so flat and close together, and the drop barely ten feet, and the current of Slushy River so sluggish. Even if you slipped, it wouldn't be a big deal if you had friends standing by—and I always had friends standing by, ready to fish me out or pay me off, depending on whether I made good on the dare. It was dumb, I know, but sometimes, when I really needed a few bucks, it seemed almost sensible. It paid for your Mother's Day present my junior year in high school, and that's the last I'm going to say about it.

But this girl—hadn't she had friends standing by when she started across the stepping stones? Why hadn't they fished her out when she slipped?

Crouching down, I pushed up the blindfold. She was pretty, but not spectacular: long blonde hair, slender build, and that fresh, open look most girls that age have; even a night in the water hadn't obscured that. She was well groomed too, from the perfectly rounded fingernails polished a pale pink to the black high heels with thin silver straps around the ankles. The clothes looked expensive—a sleeveless silvery top and sweater made of some soft, slightly shiny material and a black skirt that managed to look short and snug but not sleazy. She wore small silver hoop earrings, a silver necklace that looked sort of lacy and scoopy, and a small, round gold pin on her sweater.

The pin seemed worth a squint. It had a design on it—two squiggles followed by a letter, all in a row. I tried to make sense of it but gave up.

I sat back on my haunches and pointed to the pin. "All Greek to me," I said.

Bolt squinted in turn. "You're right, sir!" he said, his eyes taking on that familiar, adoring glow. "It is Greek! Pi Alpha Kappa. A sorority pledge pin, would you say?"

Well, naturally. Bolt reads Greek, or at least knows the alphabet. And naturally, when I'd repeated a cliché as a way of admitting I didn't know what something meant, Bolt interpreted it as a bril-

liant observation and was probably already building it into a clue that'd solve the case. It's like that every time. I know you tell me not to worry, I know you say Bolt's happy the way things are, but it's not fair to him. He thinks I'm this great detective and he's my humble assistant, when really I'm just blurting out dumb stuff, and he's somehow interpreting the blurts in a way that leads us straight to the murderer before I've even figured out if the victim's really dead. It's not right, and it's rough on my nerves. Some day, I'll make him see the truth.

This time, though, I was too distracted to focus on being fair to Bolt. Evidence was actually sliding into place for me. Culbert student, pledge pin, November—wasn't that when fraternities and sororities had their Hell Nights or whatever they call them?

"About five years ago," I said. "That boy from Ohio, the booze—remember?"

"Yes, sir." Bolt nodded promptly. "1998. Brian Abbott from Akron, eighteen, pledging Beta Gamma Omega at Culbert, told to chug a fifth of vodka on Hell Night, comatose for six days before, thank God, he came to with no apparent ill effects, though four years later he graduated with a GPA of 2.4, which didn't seem commensurate with the promise he'd shown in high school. I see what you're suggesting, sir."

For once, so did I. "What was the name of that dean of students we talked to back then?" I asked. "Cauliflower? Broccoli?"

"Edward Collard," Bolt said. "Shall I call him, sir?"

"Soon. But let's not jump to conclusions about how this happened." I turned to the coroner. "Any signs of a struggle or sexual assault, or of drinking or drugs?"

She shrugged. "Nothing I can see now. I'll know more when I get her to the lab."

"Get her there, then," I said curtly. "Meanwhile, Bolt, let's have a look around the scene, see if the uniforms have turned up anything."

They'd turned up a broken bottle of Merlot—good brand, no prints—below the falls, and a hundred and ninety-eight blue M&M's scattered near the stepping-stones. An earnest rookie said he felt sure two more M&M's were lurking in the vicinity, and he was determined to find them. I wished him Godspeed, checked the pockets of the girl's coat, and found a two-inch gold-plated flashlight on one of those little snap-apart chains you use to attach things to other things. A copy of the *Atlantic* had been tucked under the coat, along with a long-stemmed blue carnation and a small black purse. Sighing, I opened the purse.

It's a poignant part of the job, Mother. Looking through purses makes victims come alive a little, and that's tough to take. Not that this purse contained anything remarkable—except the bag from Dollar Delights containing a pink plastic Donny Osmond lint brush and a receipt saying the \$1.06 purchase was made at seven twenty-seven last night. Odd. I mean, I like Donny fine, but this girl looked too sophisticated to appreciate a guy who's just a little bit rock and roll. Everything else seemed normal: a cell phone; a compact; a key ring with a few keys, plus a rabbit's foot, a small plastic flashlight, and a tiny ballet slipper, all attached to the ring by snap-apart chains; an appointment calendar; an address book; an inexpensive, silver-banded wristwatch; a checkbook; a wallet.

I flipped through the wallet. Eight dollars, no credit cards, an Indiana driver's license, a Culbert student ID, and pictures—the girl and three other young people, maybe siblings; a middle-aged couple, probably her parents; a clean-cut young man in a blazer with a crest on the pocket, her boyfriend, possibly; and a snapshot showing the girl and four other young women, all very attractive, standing with their arms around each other.

I showed the last picture to Bolt. "Sorority sisters?" I suggested.

He nodded. "Pledge class, most likely—rather small, but as I recall, Pi Alpha Kappa takes just a few girls each year. It does more community service than the larger sororities, though, including youth outreach programs promoting healthful lifestyles."

Now that he mentioned it, I remembered Kevin had gone to a sorority-sponsored event at his school—a Have Fun Without Alcohol Halloween party, I think it was. Later, Ellen had to tell him to watch his language when he made a crack about Putrid Alpha Krappy parties; maybe that was middle-school code for Pi Alpha Kappa.

I handed the purse to Bolt. "We'll go through this more carefully later," I said. "Right now, let's call that dean."

We got a recorded message at his office—on a Sunday, I'd expected that. When we tried his home, his wife answered. "He's on campus," she said peevishly. "Where else would he be? Home with his wife? Don't be stupid. Call the student center. He said he was going to an alumni luncheon. If he's not really there, call back and let me know."

Ouch. Fortunately, he was there, all right. I broke the news gently.

"Oh good heavens," Edward Collard said. "One of our students? You're sure? Drowned? Oh good heavens. Maggie Warren? Yes, I know who she is. Oh, her poor parents. Yes, of course. I'll meet

you at my office in five minutes. Oh good heavens."

The "oh good heavens" sounded like an older man, but this guy was mid forties, if that. As soon as I saw him, the image from five years ago clicked in—tall, thin, pale, sharp featured, nervous. The hairline had receded maybe another inch since the last time I'd seen him, but the hair rounding off the back of his head was still thick and black and glossy. He unlocked the door to his private office, pointed Bolt and me to matching yellow leather armchairs facing his desk, sat down at his computer, and called up Maggie Warren's file.

"Poor Maggie," he said. "A nice girl. She's faced some challenges but handled them well. Chemistry major, 3.5 average last year. Failed an Intro to Poli Sci midterm this semester, but Dr. Skotten is a demanding professor. So, Officers. How can I help? You needn't notify the family; I'll do that."

"Fine," I said. "Our concern is figuring out the circumstances of her death. We found her body below Petite Falls. Any thoughts on how it happened?"

"Oh good heavens." He patted his forehead fretfully, as if still expecting to find hair there. "Those stepping-stones—such a temptation, such a hazard. She must have been taking a solitary stroll when she spotted them. Filled with the giddy spirit of youthful exuberance, she decided to cross. But she lost her balance—that can happen, even to young people as physically fit as our Culbert students."

"Maybe it happened like that," I acknowledged. "But some things seem odd. For example, she was blindfolded with a blue silk scarf. Does that suggest anything to you?"

I can't definitely say he blanched—with a guy that pale, it's hard to tell when the pastiness level escalates. "Why, the giddy spirit of youthful exuberance," he said. "That must be why she freely chose to increase the challenge by blindfolding herself. A tragic choice, but not surprising, given the sense of adventure typical of Culbert students. A similarly adventuresome spirit leads sixty-two percent of them to go on our fine study abroad programs. Do you know about our programs? I have some brochures—"

"We also found a Pi Alpha Kappa pledge pin on her sweater," I said, "and a hundred and ninety-eight blue M&M's. Any special significance to the color blue?"

This time, he blanched for sure. He turned a paler shade of white, or a whiter shade of pale, however the song goes. "Now that you mention it, blue is Pi Alpha's signature color. The pledges wear blue scarves during Hell Week—as it happens, last week. And on

Hell Night—as it happens, last night—each pledge turns in two hundred blue M&M's. That's one of the harmless rituals now typical at Culbert. Here. I'll show you." He took a paper from a folder on his desk. "I created these forms after that incident in 1998. It was my first year, and, oh good heavens, I nearly lost my job, though I hadn't yet had time to repair the damage done by my predecessor. He turned a blind eye to the worst initiation practices, to—oh good heavens, to *decadence*, to, well, *exploitation*. Some fraternities—well, the young women were willing enough, and not exactly nice to begin with, but . . . I now require all fraternities and sororities to turn in lists of Hell Week activities, and I allow nothing that is not completely innocent and safe. See for yourself."

The list did look completely innocent and safe. And completely dull.

Pi Alpha Kappa—Hell Week, 2004

Monday—Friday

- You must wear your pledge scarf around your neck every day, all day!
- You may not wash your hair—all week!
- You must collect 200 blue M&M's—that's right, 200! We'll count!

Saturday

- Join us at Elaine's Salon at 2:00 for a hairstyling and manicure—our treat!
- Have dinner with us at Sushi Gardens at 6:00—our treat!
- Go on our Super Pi Alpha Scavenger Hunt!
- When you've found your Scavenger Hunt treasure, bring it and all your M&M's to the Pi Alpha House for snacks, secrets, and fun!

"And these are their only Hell Week activities?" I said. "They wouldn't sneak something in on the sly, like a blindfolded trust walk across the stepping-stones?"

He shook his head. "They wouldn't dare. Any fraternity or sorority engaging in unauthorized activities loses party privileges for a full year. I've made that my policy, and I've stood by it. Thank God, I haven't actually had to enforce it."

That sounded good. I turned to Bolt. "Some challenges," I said, thinking of the tough times the dean had been through with these fraternities and sororities.

Bolt nodded briskly. "Excellent reminder, sir. Dean Collard, you said Miss Warren faced 'some challenges' but handled them well. Would you elaborate?"

Damn. I'd forgotten the dean said that. Evidently, he'd forgotten, too. "It's nothing, Officer," he said, blushing, bringing his pasty complexion to near pink. "Maggie just had trouble keeping up with tuition payments."

"She's from a poor family?" I asked.

"No." He shook his head in a decisive snap. "Both her parents are employed—her father's a teacher, her mother's a nurse—and they own a three-bedroom house and two cars. True, Maggie has three siblings, but according to our financial aid formula, the parents' income is sufficient for that. And Maggie waitressed for two years before college." He tapped more computer keys. "My records show she applied for a work-study job this September, but we had to say no. Those jobs are reserved for students with financial need, and she showed no such need. Her own savings are gone, of course, but her parents may have something stashed away, and they could always sell their second car, or take out a second mortgage, or find second jobs."

I won't describe the exact circumstances, Mother, but just recently, Ellen had snuggled up and said maybe Kevin would like a sibling. Now, I was extra glad I'd pretended to be asleep. "So you didn't offer Maggie any help?" I asked.

"Of course I did," he said indignantly. "I gave her a list of fast-food restaurants seeking employees. Soon after that, I heard she'd pledged Pi Alpha Kappa. I was delighted. The Pi Alpha girls are exceptional, all honors students, and they give more to charity than any other group on campus. And they never get into trouble—no loud parties, no alcohol-related incidents."

Well, those girls did sound awfully nice—unless they'd blindfolded Maggie, bullied her onto the stepping-stones, and run off in a panic when she fell. When we left, the dean was doing some deep-breathing exercises, summoning up courage to call Maggie's family.

As we walked across campus, my stomach started to rumble. No wonder—three o'clock, and I hadn't had lunch. We could grab something at a restaurant, but it seemed silly to bother with lunch so close to dinnertime. Besides, Ellen and I had spent a grim hour going over bills this weekend, and we'd agreed I'd brown-bag it for the rest of the month.

"Doesn't really make sense," I remarked to Bolt, figuring he too was thinking about lunch by now. "It's awful late, and those expenses add up."

His head jerked back, and that familiar now-I-see-it look popped into his eyes. "You're right, sir!" he said. "Sophomore year is awfully late to pledge a sorority—most students join as fresh-

men. And dues, extra charges for living in a sorority house—those expenses do add up. It doesn't make sense for a girl so concerned about finances to suddenly decide to pledge. Thank you for articulating that so clearly."

I wasn't sure of what I'd articulated but decided not to point that out. We'd reached the Pi Alpha house—a modest, sturdy yellow-brick building near campus. The leaves had been raked recently, and two big earthenware pots of orange geraniums flanked the door. The house blended in quietly with the neighborhood, set apart only by a small brass plate above the doorbell, inscribed with the three letters on Maggie's pledge pin. When we rang the bell, an attractive young woman in a crisp navy blue suit answered promptly. She wore little makeup, and her dark hair was pulled back in a bun.

"Good afternoon," she said, looking us over quickly. "May I help you?"

"I hope so." I showed her my badge. "I'm Lieutenant Walt Johnson, and this is Sergeant Gordon Bolt. Are you a member of Pi Alpha Kappa?"

"I am Bianca Flanders, the president," she said, and stepped back to let us enter.

She asked us to wait in the hall while she got the vice president. I passed the time by glancing at a bulletin board. There were lots of notices: Monday, 7:00—talk on investment strategies by a broker; Tuesday, 10:00—self-defense workshop, required; Thursday, 8:00—makeup workshop; Saturday—2:00, health seminar, required.

Bianca Flanders returned with another attractive young woman in a crisp gray suit, wearing very little makeup and her long red hair pulled back in a prim ponytail. Bianca introduced her as Nancy Rogers, and we all sat down stiffly in the sorority's immaculately neat lounge.

"I have some bad news," I said, watching them closely, "about Maggie Warren."

They exchanged a look. "We've been worried about her," Bianca said. "She never came back after our scavenger hunt last night. Is she all right?"

"I'm sorry to tell you this," I said, "but she's dead."

Nancy let out a little gasp. "My God!" she cried, and started sobbing quietly. Bianca walked over to her chair, put an arm around her, and gave her a handkerchief. There were tears in Bianca's eyes too, but she looked at us steadily.

"That's horrible, Lieutenant," she said. "Poor Maggie. How did it happen?"

Their reaction had me stumped. The tears and the gasp seemed genuine, but they weren't as shocked as you'd expect if this had hit them clear out of the blue. And their outfits, the lounge so neat—it looked like they'd been half expecting the police.

"We're trying to figure that out," I said. "Tell me about this scavenger hunt."

Nancy got her sobs under control, squeezed Bianca's hand, and gave her a quick, brave little nod. Bianca hugged her briefly, sat down again, and smoothed out her skirt.

"Gladly," she said, handing me a sheet that had been sitting on the coffee table, right next to a big bowl of blue M&M's. It was the same Hell Week form Dean Collard showed us. "As you can see, yesterday afternoon we all met at Elaine's Salon—that's a tradition, to reward pledges for undergoing the rigors of Hell Week. Then we had dinner at Sushi Gardens, and at 7:00 the scavenger hunt challenges were given out."

"You see," Nancy put in, "during the week before Hell Night, the senior members go to stores around town and locate silly, unusual items. We then challenge each pledge to purchase one of those items, but we don't tell her in which store she can find it. It's sort of a test of shopping skills. When the pledges find their items, they come back to the house for the initiation ceremony and a little party. No guests—just members."

Just then, another young woman took a cautious half step into the room. She was heavy and stoop shouldered, with sharply rectangular glasses and a frizzy mass of dull orange hair; she wore baggy lavender jeans, a pea green T-shirt emblazoned with the words "Frodo Forever," and a faded denim jacket. Nervously, she shifted her battered red book bag from shoulder to shoulder. "Sorry," she said. "Bianca, everything's updated. I thought I'd put in a few hours at the lab before dinner. Okay?"

"Fine," Bianca said, looking slightly flustered. "Thank you, Willie."

The incident, tiny as it was, threw me off my rhythm. I glanced around, trying to get oriented again, and noticed the bowl of bright blue candies. "Mind if I take a few M&M's?" I asked, reaching. "You must have a thousand."

"Only eight hundred." She looked at the bowl sadly. "But of course—please have some."

The M&M's gave me a nice little energy surge. "Now, you said this initiation takes place in the house?" I asked. "Not outside somewhere?"

"It took place right in this room," Bianca said, "at midnight. Why do you ask?"

I ignored the question. "And you worried when Miss Warren didn't show up?"

"Yes. The other four pledges came here well before the time for the ceremony. Maggie had last called around eight, to say she'd found her scavenger hunt item—"

"Did she call on her cell phone?" Bolt cut in. "The one we found in her purse?"

Nancy hesitated. "I'd guess she used that cell phone, Sergeant, but it's not actually hers. She didn't have one, so I lent her mine so she could keep in touch with us. It was, well, a safety measure, since she'd be out alone at night."

That sounded sensible. Whenever Kevin's out after dark, Ellen gives him her cell phone. "Did she say anything else when she called?" I asked.

"Just that she'd come here after running some errands," Bianca said. "We didn't really start worrying until midnight. Then we called her roommate, Pamela Andrews."

"This Pamela Andrews isn't a member of the sorority?" I asked.

"No. She and Maggie roomed together last year, and this year they took a room in Schuster Hall. Then Maggie decided to pledge. Since she'd already paid for her dorm room through first semester, she planned to move to the house in January. That's when most pledges move in. Anyway, Pamela wasn't in, so we left a message."

"At that point," Nancy said, "we thought Maggie had probably changed her mind about joining. Then, this morning, Pamela called and said Maggie never came back to the room last night. We then called Maggie's ex-boyfriend, Fletcher Cantrell, but he hadn't seen Maggie all week. Next, we called the hospitals. They had nothing to tell us."

"We also called the police," Bianca's face hardened a bit, and her voice grew crisper. "You probably have a record of the call. I asked if there might be any information about Maggie Warren. The desk sergeant asked if I were a member of her family. I said no, and he said in that case he couldn't tell me anything."

Well, if they'd been worried enough to make all those calls, no wonder they didn't seem more shocked when we showed up, especially since the sergeant hadn't been one hundred percent tactful. Or maybe the calls were part of a scheme to cover up what had happened at the real initiation at Petite Falls. "So according to you," I said, "all your members were in this house

last night. Were the senior members here all evening?"

"That's right," Bianca said, with a confused glance at Nancy.

"According to you, all the other pledges showed up well before the time for the ceremony," I said. "Are there witnesses who can confirm that?"

"I don't know," Nancy said. Now it was her turn to shoot a confused glance at Bianca. "We don't let non-members in the house on Hell Night, except Dean Collard. He stopped by at about ten o'clock; he stops by all the houses on Hell Night. Perhaps the neighbors—but you still haven't told us how Maggie died. Was it, well, a car accident?"

"Was Miss Warren in a car when she left for the scavenger hunt?" I asked.

"No, but she could have been run over," Bianca supplied quickly. "I'm sure that's what Nancy had in mind. Was that it? Was Maggie run over?"

That didn't sound like a real question. "No," I said. "She drowned."

This time, they both gasped, and if it wasn't genuine, they must both be theater majors. "Drowned?" Bianca jumped up from her chair again. "You mean she—*drowned*? Oh my God! Where? How? How is that possible?"

Just get it out, I decided, and see how they take it. "It's plenty possible," I said, my voice a tad brutal, "if you try to walk across the stepping-stones above Petite Falls and slip and hit your head, and your so-called sisters run off and leave you in the river. It's especially possible if you're blindfolded with a blue silk pledge scarf."

"*Blindfolded*?" Nancy started sobbing again. "Oh, Maggie!"

Bianca stared at me for a full minute. "Her pledge scarf," she said. "That's why you asked—my God. You think it was an initiation. You think— No, Lieutenant. Absolutely not. We don't do that. We don't do anything like that."

She sounded so passionate that I felt like apologizing and getting the hell out of there. Then I remembered. "It sure looked like there was a party at Petite Falls last night," I said. "How else do you explain the wine bottle and the blue M&M's? That's right. Blue M&M's, a hundred and ninety-eight at last count. Think we'll find two more?"

That really got to Nancy. She stopped crying suddenly and looked straight at me, face hard with fury. "You're wrong, Lieutenant," she said. "It wasn't us. It was—it must have been a man. It must have been some filthy pervert who—who took

Maggie by surprise, I'm sure that's what he did. And he drove her to the falls, and—"

"That's enough, Nancy," Bianca said sharply. "Lieutenant, you think Maggie's death resulted from some initiation ritual. I can say categorically that it did not. If you have more questions, I will answer them tomorrow, with an attorney present. I have Pi Alpha's reputation to consider, and I will protect it. We'll go to court if necessary, if defamatory insinuations work their way into the press, for example. Most likely Nancy is right, and Maggie was killed by a deviant who picks his victims at random. Concentrate on ridding the streets of such criminals, not on harassing us. Now, if you'll excuse us—"

Not a theater major after all—pre-law, no question. I felt plenty intimidated, let me tell you, but stuck to my guns. "Not so fast. We want to talk to the other pledges."

"Not today," Bianca said decisively. "They're at the South Street Food Pantry, preparing dinner for the homeless. If you wish to speak to them, you may do so in our attorney's office tomorrow. Please call if you'd like to schedule an appointment."

That settled it. I didn't want some newspaper to get wind of us hassling college girls busily feeding the homeless. So we headed for Schuster Hall to talk to Maggie's roommate. As we walked, I thought about how neat those girls keep their house and lawn. When I was in uniform, I'd gone to other sorority houses to break up loud parties. Those places had been awful—rotting garbage, spilled beer, little pools of vomit underfoot, and nobody seemed to care. "These girls are more careful than most," I commented. "Some of those others—messed up and rank."

Bolt nodded. "Yes, many people *do* get messed up on rank. Dean Collard, for example, called us both Officer, without regard to our actual ranks. But those girls always called you Lieutenant and me Sergeant. As you say, they're more careful than most, and they told a careful story. No uncertainty about details, no fumbling for words—when one finished a sentence, the other picked up the narrative without hesitation."

He was right. Their story *had* seemed smooth, almost rehearsed. That'd make sense if they were trying to cover something up: they'd worked their lies out in advance to make sure we'd buy their story. "They were really determined to sell it," I commented.

"Cell it?" Bolt repeated eagerly. "Is that a slang expression for making a call on a cellular telephone? Yes, they *did* seem determined to cell it. Thinking a twenty-one-year-old woman needs to borrow a cell phone when she goes out at seven—that seems over-

cautious if, as Miss Rogers said, it was intended as a safety measure. Good point, sir."

Damn, I thought. That is a good point. I only wish I'd noticed it. It's one thing for Ellen to make Kevin carry a cell phone after dark: he's in middle school. But it was odd that Nancy didn't want Maggie to go shopping without a cell phone. I can be awful slow about stuff like that. But Bolt's never slow about anything.

"Pretty quick, Bolt," I said, shaking my head in admiration.

He gasped. "You're right, sir! Supposedly, Miss Warren was given her scavenger hunt challenge at seven. And the receipt indicates she made her purchase at seven twenty-seven. That is pretty quick shopping, since it takes at least twenty minutes to walk from Sushi Gardens to Dollar Delights. So Miss Warren could hardly have been combing store after store in search of a Donny Osmond lint brush."

Did that mean they'd lied about the times? But why? My head was spinning so bad that it was a relief to reach Schuster Hall and stop the questions and revelations.

Pamela Andrews has a circular pink sign on her door, divided into wedges, with each wedge labeled IN CLASS, AT THE LIBRARY, SHOPPING TILL I DROP—like that. The wedge labeled AT HOME—JUST KNOCK had a big purple thumbtack stuck into it. So we knocked; she opened the door immediately. She's a little on the plain side, more than a little on the plump side. She was nicely dressed in khaki pants, a high-necked black cashmere sweater, and a string of pearls that looked real.

"Are you the police?" she asked. "Dean Collard called me about Maggie, and he said you might come by. Do you want to sit down?"

We sat in the thinly cushioned swivel chairs that evidently went with two narrow desks made from lacquered boards riveted to the wall. Pamela offered us Tang and crackers, and I was glad to accept—by now, I was really missing lunch.

She didn't have much to say about last night. Maggie left the room yesterday afternoon, Pamela said, and came back looking great after her hairstyling and manicure, carrying a camelhair coat, black heels, and some clothes in a garment bag. No, Pamela didn't think the things were new—she didn't see any tags, so they must've been borrowed. Maggie fussed over her makeup for half an hour before heading for Sushi Gardens. Pamela ate dinner in the cafeteria, then went to the library to work on a term paper.

"It's due Thursday," she said, "and I'm, like, *way* behind. I planned to work all night. But around nine o'clock, Fletcher—

that's Fletcher Cantrell the Third—stopped by and happened to see me. Anyhows, we got talking, and he's like, '*Vertigo* is showing at this art theater,' and I'm like, 'I love that film,' and he's like, 'Wanna go?' and I'm like, 'Why not?' And afterwards we stopped by his fraternity's Hell Night party. Some guys were miffed with Fletcher for showing up late. He was the entertainment chair, or something, and he was supposed to bring some videos or something but I guess he got distracted cause we were having such a nice time." She smoothed back her hair, sighing happily. "Anyhows, it was, like, two o'clock before I got back to the room. Maggie wasn't here, so I figured she was staying at the Pi Alpha house. I didn't check my messages until I got up for church this morning. When I found out Maggie never showed at Pi Alpha last night, I, like, freaked. Then Dean Collard called, and I, like, *really* freaked."

She sniffled; Bolt handed her a tissue. "Poor Maggie," she said. "I always tried to be there for her, but I guess I wasn't really. The dean said she was blindfolded. She must've thought she couldn't go through with it if she could look down and see the falls."

Go through with it? "You think she committed suicide?" I asked.

Pamela blinked at me. "Well, obviously, Officer. She *must* have jumped. Dean Collard said something about an accident, but Maggie wouldn't walk across those stepping-stones just for fun. What do you think she was—stupid?"

"I wouldn't say *stupid*," I said, blushing. "You wouldn't have to be stupid to—never mind. Any other reasons for thinking she might have wanted to kill herself?"

She tilted her head to the side, considering. "Sort of. She worried about money a lot. I mean, *a lot*. She'd paid her first year's tuition herself, but this year she had to let her parents pay, and she was all stressed out about tuition for next year."

"Her parents weren't willing to help?" I asked.

"Oh, they're willing," Pamela said. "Her mother cashed in half her retirement fund to cover tuition this year. But they're also putting her older brother through law school, and they just spent a bundle on her older sister's wedding, and her little sister has orthodontist bills. Maggie hated being a burden to them—that's the way she put it. So I guess she decided she'd relieve them of the burden by—by—you know."

She blew her nose, and I sneaked more crackers. "Did she talk about these problems a lot?" I asked, swallowing hard and reaching for the Tang.

"She used to." Pamela accepted a fresh tissue. "And I tried to,

like, sympathize. But my parents have real jobs—I just don't have those problems, y'know? I don't even have to work part time. Maggie worked at Burger Bonanza, but minimum wage doesn't make much of a dent in tuition. And she was working so many hours her grades went down, and she was worried she'd lose this tiny merit scholarship she had. The whole thing was making her real tense. Then she started acting, like, irrationally."

"In what way?" I asked.

Her face shifted from sorrowful to sour. "She pledged Pi Alpha. That made *no* sense. Last year, we got lots of invitations to rush parties, and we just, like, laughed them off. We both thought sororities were so dumb; you waste so much time and money, and most of the girls are so stuck up. And then this year, when Maggie has absolutely no time or money to spare, she's all of a sudden like, 'Maybe I'll pledge Pi Alpha.' And I'm like, 'Why?' But I wanted to support her, so I went to the rush party with her."

"But you decided not to pledge?"

She pursed her lips. "I didn't get a bid. See what I mean, about the girls being stuck up? They only take really skinny girls, girls who look so—so just so, y'know?"

"Well, not all of them," I said, remembering. "When we were at the Pi Alpha house, we saw this Billie or Jillie or—"

"Willie Fenz," Pamela said. "Well, yeah. But she's a computer genius. She maintains the college's Web site single-handedly, and she's got, like, a four-point-two-million GPA. Everybody figures the Pi Alphas let her in so they'd never have to worry about keeping their own grades up. All fraternities and sororities have to maintain a group GPA of at least 2.5. With Willie pushing their average up, the Pi Alphas are set."

Maybe, but Dean Collard had said all the Pi Alphas were honor students anyway. "And all the other members are very attractive?" I asked.

"Flat-out gorgeous. But they're not from good families or anything—just regular families, all of them. Anyhows, when they turned me down, I thought Maggie would refuse her bid. I mean, we were best friends, almost. You'd think she'd be loyal. But no. And after she pledged, she stopped really talking to me. It was just like, Pi Alpha this, and Pi Alpha that—no real *conversation*. I wasn't the only person she shut out, either."

"Do you mean Fletcher Cantrell?" Bolt asked. "The young man you met at the library? The young ladies at Pi Alpha called him Miss Warren's ex-boyfriend. At what point did he cease to be her boyfriend and become her ex-boyfriend?"

"At the point when she pledged Pi Alpha." She sighed. "He's the *niciest* guy, from a *great* family. His father's company takes up three whole floors in the Bradstone Center downtown. And they'd dated so long—a whole year, almost. He even e-mailed her over the summer. At first, they were real close this year. Then, right after pledging, Maggie tells Fletcher she wants to just be friends. You know what *that* means—just be friends."

I knew exactly what it means. It means you're being dumped. I cringed, remembering high school, remembering college, remembering all the girls who'd told me they wanted to just be friends. Thank goodness I finally met Ellen; thank goodness she was willing to marry me and didn't care about being friends.

I glanced at my notes. It looked like Maggie had been under lots of pressure, had cut off some friends—did that add up to suicide? Maybe. The blindfold could fit with suicide, too—not that it takes all that much courage to look down at a ten-foot jump if you're hell bent on killing yourself anyway. But if Maggie had a fear of heights . . .

The door flew open, and a young guy in jeans and a Culbert basketball jacket rushed in. "Pam!" he cried. "Is it true? Seth Baker said Maggie—but it can't be true!"

In a second, Pamela bounced up from her perch on the edge of her bed, wrapped her arms around the guy's neck, and collapsed on his shoulder. "Oh, Fletcher!" she sobbed. "I'm sorry, but it's true!" Still clinging to him, she pointed at us. "These are policemen—Officer Johnson and somebody else. I told them how upset Maggie's been this year, and that must be why she went to the falls and decided to jump and—"

"Decided to jump?" He disentangled himself from her arms and took three steps back. "No way, Pam, no way! Maggie wouldn't do that!"

"I know it's horrible to think she felt so hopeless," she said, holding out her arms, walking toward him again. "You must feel like you let her down; so do I. But we can help each other through this. We can, like, comfort each other. We can—"

"The hell with that." He looked at her for a moment, grimaced, turned to face us. "Look, I never let Maggie down. And if Pam says Maggie committed suicide—no way!"

"That's just one theory," I said soothingly. "You're Fletcher Cantrell?"

He stuck his hands in his jacket pockets, hunched his shoulders forward, and stared at the floor. "Right. How'd you know?"

"Your name's come up a few times. I put two and two together."

I'd done some real detective work, all right—it was hard not to look smug. I put a hand on his shoulder. "Look, son, you've had a nasty shock. Sit down. You can have my chair."

"And you need a drink," Pamela said eagerly. "I'll make Tang."

"I don't wanna sit down. And I don't want Tang." He paced four steps, reached the wall, had to turn around and pace in the opposite direction. "I gotta keep my head clear. Seth said it's all over campus that Maggie was pushed over Petite Falls. He said she'd been blindfolded with her pledge scarf, and her hands were tied, and—"

"Don't believe everything you hear," I said. "Her hands weren't tied. And we don't know if she was pushed." Oops, I thought—shouldn't have said that much, not yet.

"Then she *was* blindfolded with her pledge scarf," he said. "That settles it. It was those girls, those Pi Alpha bitches."

"Fletcher!" Pamela covered her ears. "Don't say the b-word!"

"That's what they are," he said. "Ever since Maggie got messed up with them, she hasn't been the same. They must've brain-washed her, or drugged her, or something. And now they killed her. It was some sick initiation ritual, don't you think so, Officer?"

"That's another theory," I admitted. "But we don't know yet if—"

"Well, I know," he insisted. "Everybody on campus knows there's something wrong with the Pi Alphas. They don't have more than a few parties a year, they never serve booze, and half the time they don't even send a representative to Greek Council meetings. You saying that's not weird? And none of them have steady boyfriends. Everybody says they've got this sick three date rule: You date a guy three times, and you gotta dump him, or you're out of Pi Alpha. And *that's* not weird?"

It did sound weird, if it was true. "Is that what Miss Warren told you?" I asked.

"That's not what she said." Angrily, he took a cracker from the box Pam held out. "She just said we should cool things down. Well, fine. To tell the truth, I'd been thinking that myself. I mean, I liked Maggie—she was real pretty, a real good time. Everybody liked her. But she'd been getting serious, even talking about a ring, and I wasn't ready for that. So I was just waiting for the right time to let her down easy. Then she says *she* wants to break it off. In some ways, I was relieved, but I was worried about her, afraid it was because these Pi Alpha freaks had got their hooks into her."

Bolt looked up from his notes. "You say no Pi Alphas have steady boyfriends. Do you suspect that—well, that their sexual preferences lie outside the mainstream?"

Fletcher stared. "Hell, no. No. Maggie wouldn't have had anything to do with them if they were like that. But something's wrong with them, and they drew Maggie in. I don't know how—money, maybe. She was worried about that, and the Pi Alphas have a way with it. They buy stocks, and they've got a real strong alumni network. They're always getting great jobs. Maybe they promised to make her rich, but first they made her go through this initiation, and they sat there and partied and watched her die."

The phone rang, and Pamela ran to answer it. "Hello?" she said. "Oh. Hi, Bianca. Thanks. Horrible, but I'm coping. Fletcher's helping me—thank God he's so strong. A memorial service? Tomorrow at seven? Yes, I'll say a few words. I'll write a poem."

A memorial service. I jotted down the time. You can learn lots by watching how people react at memorial services. As soon as Bolt and I were in private, I called the station. The coroner still had tests to do, she said; she'd have her report in the morning. Frankly, I was just as glad she didn't have anything for us yet.

"We've put in enough hours for a Sunday, Bolt," I said. "Let's go home and eat."

Not that there was much to eat at home. Ellen and Kevin were still all stony and surly about the Sunday school mess, and Ellen was too mad at both of us to make a real dinner. We sat down to a silent meal of warmed-up tuna casserole and garlic bread made from stale hamburger buns. Then Kevin stomped upstairs and pretended to do homework while I pretended not to know he was really fooling around on his computer. Ellen went to bed early, so I watched a *Sopranos* rerun and had a hard time working up sympathy for Tony. I mean, sure his family doesn't appreciate him, but that can happen even if you don't mess around with other women and don't get guys whacked. And at least, no matter what he's done, Carmela always has a nice dinner waiting for him.

Things didn't get better in the morning. "Not exactly a rave review," Ellen observed, tossing the newspaper and a box of Pop-Tarts at me.

I glanced at the front page. A photo of Maggie—her high school graduation picture, probably—and a headline: CULBERT STUDENT FALLS VICTIM TO RANDOM STREET CRIME. The article said Maggie Warren, an honors student at Culbert, had drowned in Slushy River, the apparent victim of a deviant who picked her off the streets at random and assaulted her. A guy from the mayor's office and the public safety commissioner were quoted, saying how shocked they were. The mayor's guy hinted maybe the solution was cracking down on the homeless. And an editorial—Ellen had

plastered it with a purple sticky-note, to make sure I didn't miss it—said the police should clean up the streets and protect innocents from random street crimes.

I stuck my untoasted Pop-Tart in my pocket and drove to the station. Bolt, already at his desk, was peering at stuff from Maggie's purse and pockets.

The coroner, hovering nearby, tossed me a manila folder. "She wasn't raped," she said, "despite the paper's oh-so-delicate insinuations about 'assault.' No signs of struggle or recent sexual activity. Not a virgin, but if she was the victim of a 'random street crime,' the crime was *not* rape."

"That's a start," I said, biting off a corner of my Pop-Tart. "Anything else?"

"Not yet. Her coat was dry-cleaned recently but has several hairs on it, some definitely Maggie's, some definitely not. Find us a suspect, we'll see if the definitely-nots match up. As to time of death—if she ate dinner at six, she died between eight and ten."

"Any signs of drugs?" I asked. "Or drinking?"

"Drugs, no," she said decisively. "Drinking, yes. One or two glasses of red wine, right before she died, most still in her stomach, not her bloodstream. So I guess she shared a toast or two with this deviant who forced her into his car."

"Let's say she drank the wine at a sorority party right at the falls," I said, remembering the broken bottle of Merlot. "Are the facts consistent with that theory?"

"With that theory and a dozen others." She yawned. "Suicide, for example. She's feeling blue, she heads for the falls with a bottle for company, she slugs down some wine, throws the bottle over the falls, decides to follow the bottle. Or she takes her bottle to the park for a private party before the initiation. The wine makes her so giddy she traipses across the stepping-stones, blindfolding herself to add to the fun—"

"The wine wouldn't have had time to make her giddy yet," Bolt objected. "Now, were the bruises on her forehead definitely caused by the rocks below Petite Falls?"

"Not definitely," she said. "Cripes, Bolt—you've been at this long enough to know these things don't tend to be definite. Fact is, there was more bruising than I'd expect. Maybe someone smashed her head against something blunt, knocked her out, then finished things off by putting her in the river. Then again, maybe not."

"Thanks for narrowing down the possibilities," I said, irritated. Random street crime, some other kind of homicide, initiation,

suicide, accident—I still had to consider them all. As the coroner strode back to her lab, I shuffled moodily through the folder.

"A stimulating case," Bolt said, blinking happily. "I imagine it poses a challenge even to your powers of deduction—not that I doubt you'll solve it in record time, sir. As for me, I've been looking through Miss Warren's things, gleaning what poor shreds of evidence I can. Her checkbook shows a balance of three dollars and eighty-seven cents. I called the bank, and a helpful clerk remarked that Miss Warren stopped by Saturday morning to open a savings account with an initial deposit of five dollars, the minimum amount the bank accepts. Rather an optimistic move, wouldn't you say, sir, considering her circumstances?"

Damned optimistic. It pretty much knocked the hell out of the suicide theory. She had dressed carefully and fussed over her makeup—who'd bother with that on her way to a watery grave? "And the clothes, the makeup," I said. "Those don't fit, either."

Bolt looked lost, then nodded. "Shrewd observation. Then there's her calendar—she has three appointments marked for the next two weeks with someone named John. You see? For this Thursday—'John, Elite Lounge, 8 P.M.' And for next Saturday—'John, Fifth Street Grill, 10 P.M.' And for the following Wednesday—'John, airport, 6:45 P.M.'"

So Maggie had a new boyfriend. Maybe that's why she broke up with Fletcher. Maybe John could help us decide if the suicide theory made sense. Naturally, he had to have a common first name, but at a college as small as Culbert, we'd track him down.

"And there's this." Bolt held out Maggie's address book. "Under L—for lawyer, I assume—she has Phillip Easton's number. Why would a college student carry around the number for a high-powered criminal attorney?"

"I'll call his office and see," I said.

The secretary who took the call checked the Rolodex, checked computer files, checked with other secretaries, found no mention of Maggie Warren, no one who'd heard of her before reading this morning's newspaper.

"Dead end," I said to Bolt. "Anything else?"

Frowning, he pointed to Maggie's silver-banded watch. "I am bemused about why the watch was in her purse. It matches her outfit—the silvery top and sweater, the silver ankle straps, the silver necklace and earrings. Why wasn't she wearing it?"

Well, that goes to show you. Even a smart guy like Bolt can miss obvious things. This was a cheap watch, not waterproof. Naturally, if Maggie was crossing the stepping-stones for an initiation, or just

for fun, she'd take her watch off. She wouldn't worry about drowning—kids always feel immortal—but she'd worry about landing in the water and ruining her watch. This time, I was a step ahead of Bolt.

"It's easy to miss a step," I said, worried he'd feel bad about messing up. "Anyone can make a slip." Eventually, he'd get over feeling dumb—I've done it often enough—but how could I assure him of that? "Time," I said. "That's real important. Things can be all smashed up, but—oh, damn." How could I find the perfect word to say that wounded pride gradually gets better. That it, well . . . what? "Heals," I said, realizing that was the word. "That's what you should focus on—heals. Know what I mean?"

"I do!" Bolt leapt up. "Heels! Her black high heels! As you say, it's easy to miss a step, anyone can make a slip—especially if one is wearing high heels while crossing slimy stepping-stones! If she had the presence of mind to remove her watch because she feared tumbling into the water, why did she lack the presence of mind to remove the shoes that made tumbling far likelier? And, as you say, things can get all smashed up, particularly inexpensive watches that might smash against the rocks, fixing the time of death too precisely to be convenient for the perpetrator. I concur, Lieutenant. The murderer removed her watch to obscure the time of death, but forgot to remove her shoes to support the theory she crossed the stepping-stones voluntarily. Thank goodness for those ankle straps—without them, her shoes might have been dislodged by the current, and we might still be unsure this was indeed a homicide."

Indeed a homicide. I guess he'd narrowed the possibilities down after all. Or maybe I had. Before I could figure out who'd done the narrowing, the phone rang.

It was Phillip Easton. "My secretary told me you phoned," he said. "Maggie Warren called recently, asking if she could do an internship in my office. I said no—I'm a busy man, Lieutenant, with no time to supervise interns. And, sadly, no time to chat with you. But that's why she had my number in her address book. Good luck. I hope you can rid our streets of these perverts who make random attacks on young girls."

He hung up. "That was Easton," I told Bolt. "He says Maggie wanted to do an internship in his office." I shook my head. This guy was a successful lawyer; you'd think he'd be smooth. But he'd sounded abrupt, almost jittery. Charisma? No way. No good at making connections with people, either. "Chemistry?" I said out loud. "I don't think so."

"I don't think so, either," Bolt said. "Why would a chemistry

major such as Maggie seek an internship in a law office? He's hiding something. Succinctly put, sir."

I wasn't sure of what it was I'd put so succinctly—or of what *succinctly* means, if you want the truth—but the phone rang again before I had to figure out what to say next. This call was from the owner of a drugstore near Sushi Gardens. He'd seen Maggie's picture in the paper and thought we should know that shortly after seven on Saturday, she'd stopped by his store with four other young women, all nicely dressed, all carrying long-stemmed blue carnations. They'd all bought copies of the *Atlantic*, then they hugged each other and took off on foot in different directions. He couldn't remember the last time he'd sold so many copies of the *Atlantic* in one night. Well, that confirmed what the dean said about Pi Alpha girls being exceptional—not many college kids would plan on curling up with such a heavy-duty magazine on a Saturday night.

Before I could comment on that, we got yet another call, from a city councilman holding an emergency hearing on random street crime. Be at City Hall in ten minutes, he said. Hastily, I swept the things from Maggie's purse and pocket into a manila envelope, intending to drop it off at the evidence lockup on our way out; but a deputy chief collared us in the hall, ranting about how we had to work together to wipe out random street crime, and I forgot to stop at the lockup. Oh, well—it isn't procedure to take evidence out of the station, but chances were nobody would notice.

As it turned out, I was glad I'd taken the envelope. It kept Bolt occupied during the hearing, which dragged on all day, with lots of speeches from judges and state representatives, but no one ever got around to asking us to report. Fortunately, the councilman had a hefty budget for snacks; aides kept bringing around imported spring water and tidbit-crowded trays, so I nibbled steadily, never having to resort to the Cheez Whiz and anchovy on Wonder bread sandwich Ellen had hurled into my brown bag that morning. As for Bolt, he didn't eat; just kept pawing through the evidence, squinting and frowning, and knowing him, probably thinking.

"You're missing something, Bolt," I whispered—it's always a mistake to pass up free food. But he just kept frowning, holding the flashlight from Maggie's coat pocket in one hand, her trinket-laden key ring in the other. I bit into a tiny tortilla roll, then sampled a pastry puff. Both were stuffed with cream cheese mixed with vegetables that were too minced-up to be recognizable; both tasted pretty much the same. "Duplication," I said, disappointed.

"I realize that, sir," he said, nodding soberly. "How do you explain it?"

Well, hell. How inventive can you expect civil servant cooks to be? And when snacks are free, why be picky? "It's a gift," I said reproachfully. "Why reject a gift?"

"A rejected gift?" His eyes widened. "I see what you mean. And, as you ask, who would reject such a gift, and why? You've given me something to think about, sir."

I didn't want him to think; I wanted him to eat. But he just kept staring at evidence. I nibbled some more, dozed, woke up, glanced at my watch. Cripes—six forty-five.

I elbowed Bolt. "Time for the memorial service," I said. "Let's sneak out."

He slid the evidence back in the envelope, I took a final swig of water, and we headed for my car. Before we reached it, a tousle-haired TV reporter rushed up, camera crew scampering behind him, and demanded to know what the police intended to do about random street crime. No comment, I said, and drove to the Pi Alpha house. Sure enough, on the lawn stood another TV reporter—slick haired this time—asking Dean Collard about the rising tide of random street crime; but the dean insisted that Maggie died in an accident caused by the giddy spirit of youthful exuberance, that crime was a thing unknown to this city, that parents could feel safe about sending children here to attend Culbert College, which combines a solid liberal arts curriculum with outstanding pre-professional majors. Impatient, the reporter glanced away, spotted me, and charged. Hastily, I hustled Bolt out of camera range, past the potted geraniums, into the house.

"The random street crime theory is spreading," I remarked. Well, that theory did fit most of the facts. "There's lots of support for it," I admitted.

"Yes, lots of support," Bolt agreed, polishing his glasses on his tie. "From some high places—the newspaper, the mayor's office, the public safety commissioner, a deputy police chief, city council, judges, state representatives, television reporters. Odd, isn't it, to see how many powerful men are rushing to lend support to this particular theory?"

Why was it odd for public-spirited guys to care about public safety? "It's natural for some men to care," I said, "about whether young women can walk the streets safely."

Bolt gasped. "Natural for some men to care," he repeated, "about whether young—good gracious, sir! Do you really think so?"

Sure, I thought so. But I had more pressing matters on my mind:

I'd downed a lot of spring water. I lowered my voice. "I've got to find the john," I said.

Bolt nodded sharply. "Oh yes, sir," he said, not even bothering to speak softly. "By all means, you must find the john. That is crucial—I know that."

Jeez, how did he know that? Does he read minds too? And did he have to keep everyone in the room posted about my physical condition? "Communication is important, Bolt," I said, softly, "but some things are delicate. You can't just broadcast them. Sometimes you have to be subtler, more sophisticated. Understand?"

He knit his brow. "I don't think so, sir."

Well, I know I'm no good at expressing things—lots of people have trouble understanding me sometimes. "Sometimes, it takes a genius," I said, slapping him on the back in apology. With that, I left him and wandered the hallways until I bumped into a door marked "Gentleman Callers." Essential business completed, feeling far more equal to the task of solving murders, I made my way back to the front hall and saw Bolt locked in conversation with heavyset, frizzy-haired Willie Fenz. She was wearing the same baggy jeans she'd worn yesterday, but in deference to the occasion, she'd put on a black T-shirt, marked by a helmeted profile and the words "Sympathy for the Darth." And she was crying. Bolt said something, and she shook her head; he said something else, and she hesitated, then nodded; he said another thing, and she broke into sobs. They spoke in hurried whispers for a few moments, and then he turned away, saw me, and sighed.

"Just as you said, sir," he said sadly. "Sometimes, you can't just broadcast things—and sometimes, it *does* take a genius. Of course, the ultimate question remains. Or have you deduced the answer to that too?"

I shrugged—when you don't know what the hell is going on, shrugging is safest—and pretended to examine the floral arrangements crowding the hallway. Every fraternity and sorority on campus had sent flowers, it seemed. While I was admiring a vase of roses from the Jewish sorority, Nu Nu Nu, a little commotion broke out at the front door.

Bianca Flanders and Nancy Rogers stood on either side of the door, shaking hands and accepting condolences. But then Fletcher Cantrell III, Maggie's ex-boyfriend, walked in with Maggie's roommate, Pamela Andrews, clinging to his arm. When Bianca held out a hand to Fletcher, he snarled and backed away.

"This is garbage," I heard him say to Pamela. "Let's get out of here."

"But I *need* you." Pamela tightened her grip. "This is so, like, emotional for me."

"We're all grieving, Fletcher," Nancy said. "I think it would help you if—"

She took a step toward him, but he shoved her away. "Back off, bitch," he said.

Pamela gasped, reminded Fletcher not to use the b-word, and tugged him into the lounge where Bolt and Bianca and Nancy and I had all sat so stiffly yesterday. It looked different now. Curtains were drawn, couches had been moved out to make way for rows of folding chairs, and the bowl of blue M&M's was gone, replaced by a dark blue candle in a silver candlestick. A huge photograph of Maggie hung over the fireplace, just below a blue satin banner printed with Greek words. Two girls in black, one strumming on a guitar and the other playing a flute, produced an appropriately mournful duet. As more people crowded into the lounge, I nudged Bolt toward the back row, and we waited until the music stopped and Bianca Flanders stepped up to the blue-draped podium.

"We are here," she said, "to remember Maggie, taken from us by an act of random street crime. Her parents are making arrangements to take her home, but they're with us in spirit. Now, I ask all members and alumni of Pi Alpha Kappa to rise for our oath."

Almost all the women in the room stood up—college-aged women, middle-aged women, a few considerably older women, every one of them strikingly attractive and very well dressed. Solemnly, they recited the oath in unison:

"Pi Alpha Kappa—we pledge ourselves to you.

"To Pistay—Loyalty: Our loyalty to our sisters is tested, firm, unshakable;

"To Arete—Excellence: We loyally help each other achieve excellence;

"To Koinonia—Community: Excellence forms the basis of our community."

Without another word, they sat down. I gotta tell you, I had a lump in my throat.

Next, the guitarist and the flutist led us in "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" and "Blowin' in the Wind." It's a sorry reflection on the state of contemporary music, Mother, that when today's college kids need songs gloomy enough for memorial services, they have to reach clear back to the sixties. Bianca returned to the podium.

"We don't have a formal service planned," she said. "Instead, I'd like to invite people who cared about Maggie to speak. Nancy, would you go first?"

The vice president shared her thoughts about Maggie's niceness and random street crime's nastiness. Several other Pi Alpha members followed, all sticking to the same two themes. The mayor's assistant who'd been quoted in the newspaper spoke too, also bemoaning random street crime. Then Maggie's roommate stood up.

"When Bianca said there wouldn't be a real service," Pamela said when she got to the podium, "I was like, 'Ohmygod! Why not?' I mean, even though Maggie wasn't, like, *religious*, it's only, like, right, since she's, like, dead. So I wish I'd written a prayer. But I wrote a poem. And I didn't want to make it real long or drawn out. So I wrote a haiku:

"Dark, dismal despair,

"Blindly, hopelessly leaping—

"Pain ends with sad splash."

It almost took my breath away, it was that good. Pamela sat down again, linking arms with Fletcher Cantrell III; he stared fixedly at the floor.

I nudged Bolt. "Quite some couple," I said. You know I'm not the judgmental type, Mother, but it did seem wrong for Maggie's roommate to be playing up to Maggie's ex-boyfriend so soon. But Pamela would naturally be attracted to a big-man-on-campus type. "He's the entertainment chair for his fraternity," I said. "We can't forget that."

Bolt gasped. "Indeed not, sir," he said. "A brilliant observation!"

Yeah, I *am* good at figuring out what attracts folks to each other. Meanwhile, Dean Collard had scrambled to the podium and launched into a speech about how sad it was that giddy, youthful exuberance had robbed Maggie of the opportunity to benefit further from the educational and extracurricular opportunities at Culbert College. Fifteen minutes into his list of clubs and intramural sports, even the sincerest-looking mourners were sneaking glimpses at their watches. Finally, Dean Collard glanced in my direction.

"Here's someone who should speak," he said. "Some people have said the police can't keep the streets safe for Culbert students—and other residents of our fair city, of course. But our streets *are* safe; Officer Johnson can attest to that. Officer Johnson?"

You know how I hate public speaking, Mother, how sweaty and incoherent it makes me—even sweatier and more incoherent than

usual, I mean. But I didn't have much choice. Glancing hopelessly at Bolt, I shuffled to the podium.

"We cops keep the streets pretty safe," I said, faltering. "This talk about random crime—well, I don't know." Damn, I thought. I should be talking about Maggie, not doing a police promo. I should say I realized how senseless her death was—but how? "I never knew Maggie," I said, "but I got vivid images of her from talking to folks. I can see her getting all dressed up and fussing over her makeup, just to get ready for an evening with her sorority sisters. I see her and the other pledges buying the *Atlantic*, carrying blue carnations, setting off on their scavenger hunt. And it—well, it all seems wrong. I mean, it just doesn't make sense. And I can see—hell. What can I see?"

Fresh out of images, I glanced around for inspiration and spotted the Pi Alpha banner. "There's your slogan," I said. "I know those three words mean a lot to you." Unfortunately, they didn't mean a lot to me. How could they? They were Greek. I'd found the oath so moving I'd felt sure I'd remember all three words; but I had to strain for even one. "Loyalty," I said, floundering. "That's the first word in your slogan. While people were speaking, that word that kept coming back to me. Loyalty. And I thought it was, well, poignant, and—hell." I gave up. It was humiliating, and there was only one way out. "Bolt," I said, "take over. Say what needs to be said."

Startled, he scurried to the podium, evidence envelope tucked under his arm. "You're sure you want me to take over?" he whispered. "To say what needs to be said?"

"Hell, yes," I whispered back. "I hate public speaking. You know that."

"Well, yes, sir, I do," he said, lowering his voice still further. "But do you think it's best to say what needs to be said now, in public? Not later, in private?"

What sense would that make, to give a memorial speech in private? "It has to be now, Bolt," I insisted. "You'll know just how to put it, you always do."

He gulped, pushing his glasses back so they'd sit more firmly on his nose. "Very well, sir," he said. "But stay by my side." He breathed in through his nose, out through his mouth, then looked up. "Dean Collard," he said, "President Flanders, ladies and gentlemen. It has fallen to my lot to finish what Lieutenant Johnson so courageously began. I can do no better than to echo the last note he sounded. Loyalty. This room is filled with people who should be loyal to Maggie Warren—her sorority sisters, her dean,

her former boyfriend, her roommate. But what, I ask you, does loyalty truly mean?"

He looked out, the intensity of his gaze seeming to melt the thick lenses of his glasses. Just about everybody wilted—or, at least, looked away, or looked down.

"Loyalty," Bolt continued, "demands that everybody who cared about Maggie should be eager to see the truth about her death established, to see anyone responsible brought to justice. And many people in this room have offered theories about Maggie's death. One of those theories, I believe, is sincere but mistaken. The rest? Not only mistaken, but also insincere. Many people in this room know more of the truth about Maggie's death than they will admit. And one person in this room knows the full truth about how Maggie died, and about who killed her."

He paused. I don't have to tell you it was a dramatic pause.

"We know quite a bit," he continued, "about the night Maggie died. And most of it, as the lieutenant said, does not make sense. She planned, supposedly, to dine with her sorority sisters, go on a scavenger hunt that might require hours of walking, then go to a party where no men were allowed. Does it make sense, then, that she'd borrow a seductive outfit, put on high heels, and lavish care on her makeup? As the lieutenant says, that seems wrong. We must assume, therefore, that she did not plan to spend the entire evening with her sorority sisters. She planned to meet a man."

She did? Damn—I never would've guessed. But what man had she planned to meet? I remembered her appointment calendar, the dates she'd set for the next weeks. I tugged on Bolt's sleeve. "John," I whispered. "Don't forget John."

He nodded. "The other image the lieutenant described was of Maggie and her pledge sisters carrying blue carnations and buying copies of the *Atlantic*. What sense does that make? None, if they were going on a scavenger hunt and then to a women-only party. The only explanation that *does* make sense is that they were all going to meet men—men they had not met before. That's why they carried the carnations and magazines—so they and their designated men could recognize each other."

"That's enough," the guy from the mayor's office said, pointing furiously. "Maggie Warren was a victim of random street crime—everybody agrees about that."

"Many people do agree about that," Bolt admitted. "Many important people—many important *men*. The lieutenant and I first heard the random-crime theory put forth yesterday by Pi Alpha's president. By morning, many important men were echo-

ing that theory. Did Miss Flanders call them after our session yesterday, asking them to publicly support the random-crime theory? Did these men have a special reason for spreading that theory, and suppressing the truth? As Lieutenant Johnson drolly remarked to me, some men care about young women who walk the streets. Not that Maggie Warren was a streetwalker—she was a call girl, like the other members of Pi Alpha Kappa.”

Now Bianca Flanders stood up. “That’s slander,” she said icily. “Another word, and you’ll hear from our attorney.”

“Would that be Phillip Easton?” Bolt inquired. “Maggie had his phone number in her address book—do you give it to all your pledges, in case they’re picked up for prostitution? When we called Mr. Easton’s office, the secretaries could find no record of Maggie, but Mr. Easton called back minutes later with an obviously fabricated story, trying to explain things away. Is he a customer, as well as your attorney?”

Bianca barely flinched. “Now you’ve slandered Mr. Easton too. You’ll be lucky to keep your job, Sergeant Bolt.”

“However long I may keep it,” he said, “I can count on you to get my title right. Everybody else here calls me ‘Officer,’ but you and Miss Rogers always carefully noted policemen’s ranks—the lieutenant remarked on that. Did Mr. Easton teach you that point of etiquette, to prepare you for dealings with the police? If so, he coached you well. But I doubt he can make a slander charge stick. Pi Alpha takes only a few pledges each year—all attractive, all from middle-class families that find tuition a crushing burden. You rejected Maggie’s roommate, Pamela. She thinks you didn’t consider her attractive enough. Perhaps. Or perhaps you judged her too rich to be tempted by promises of quick cash, or too straight-laced to countenance your activities. A churchgoer who gasps when the ‘b-word’ is uttered doesn’t seem a strong candidate for prostitution. But Maggie, desperate to make money any way she could, had scheduled three meetings with ‘John’—a discreet designation for the next three customers your sorority had lined up for her.”

Yikes, Bolt, I thought, that’s awful flimsy. And Dean Collard had said the Pi Alpha girls were really nice. I tugged on Bolt’s sleeve again. “Don’t forget their good reputation,” I warned. “Perfect behavior, charities, activities. That’s evidence too.”

“Evidence of a negative sort,” he agreed, “but damning. Your sorority takes such elaborate precautions to safeguard its reputation, it stands to reason you’re covering something up. Then there’s the list of activities we saw yesterday. Workshops in makeup and

self-defense, in health precautions and investment strategies, all perfectly suited to young women who need to look their best and to know how to protect themselves, who face certain health hazards in hopes of benefiting financially. Maggie obviously hoped to reap such benefits: She opened a savings account the day she died because she expected to start earning that very night. The scavenger hunt was just a ruse to fool the dean; Maggie bought her Donny Osmond lint brush so quickly that you must have told her where to find it. Her actual quest was to find and satisfy her first customer. *That* is the true nature of your Hell Night initiation. *That* is how your pledges prove themselves."

"Absurd!" Dean Collard protested, so pale his lips had faded to a beige blur. "I watch the sororities and fraternities so closely—how could they ever manage it?"

"Sometimes," Bolt said grimly, "it takes a genius. As Lieutenant Johnson noted, communication is important, but some things are so delicate *you can't broadcast them*—you have to be *more sophisticated*. That's why Pi Alpha admitted Willie Fenz, the only member who doesn't participate directly in its distinctive form of free enterprise. Instead, for a percentage of the others' earnings, she manages a Web site so discreetly that neither the college nor the police detected it. This Web site offers visitors glimpses of scantily clad young women, their faces obscured by blue silk scarves. That's how Pi Alpha screens customers and sets up assignments. Miss Fenz has admitted as much."

So many people gasped that I expected the walls to cave in because of the sudden change in air pressure. People whipped their heads around, looking for Willie Fenz. But she's a genius, not a dummy; she had taken off long ago. Then Pamela started crying.

"So that's why Maggie killed herself," she sobbed. "At the last moment, she couldn't, like, go through with the ickiness. She went to the Falls, and she must have been, like, 'Whoa! I can't do this!' So she blindfolded herself, and—"

"No," Bolt cut in. "The blindfold and the scattered M&M's were attempts to frame Pi Alpha by making Maggie's murder look like an initiation gone wrong. But Pi Alpha's pledges do not go to Petite Falls. They meet their customers, then come back here with the candies they collected during the week. Yesterday, we saw a bowl filled with eight hundred blue M&M's, deposited by the other four pledges when they returned safely after their probationary trysts. Maggie, sadly, did not survive her first assignment."

"I don't believe it." Dean Collard shook his head. "That any

Culbert College sorority or fraternity could indulge in such behavior. Impossible!"

"Is it?" Bolt asked. "You said that in the past Culbert sororities and fraternities indulged in disgraceful practices. You hinted at one of them when you spoke of *decadence* and *exploitation*; you said some initiations involved women who *weren't exactly nice young women*, who were *willing enough*. Just who were these not exactly nice young women, and what were they willing enough to do?"

"Oh good heavens!" Now, the dean blushed. "Well, it was before my time. But apparently, when some fraternity pledges hadn't—well, if they were still, well, innocents—well, the senior members would find women willing to, well, initiate them."

"And what senior member would be assigned the task of finding willing women to perform this initiation?" Bolt asked. "The entertainment chairman?"

I expected Fletcher to jump up and deny it. But it was Pamela who jumped. "Stop that!" she cried, draping an arm around Fletcher's shoulders. He sat hunched in his chair, staring at the floor, as if trying to decipher a message woven into the rug. "Fletcher," Pamela declared, "would never do that. He didn't even want to go to his dumb old fraternity party. He spent most of Saturday night with me."

"He did," Bolt agreed. "And, charming as you are, it's odd that on the night of a major party he'd seek you out at the library—the sign on your door told him where to find you—and take you to a movie. Perhaps he needed an alibi, as well as time to compose himself—and his story—before facing his fraternity brothers to explain why he'd failed to provide the promised entertainment."

"That's just, like, dumb!" she insisted. "Fletcher, tell him!"

At last, Fletcher looked up. Deliberately, he removed Pamela's hand from his shoulder. "I'm not saying anything until I call my father's lawyer. This guy doesn't have proof. He just gets a kick out of slandering me in front of all these people."

"I'm sure that upsets you," Bolt said evenly. "I know you care deeply about what people think. When you spoke of your feelings for Maggie, it was important to you that everyone liked her. But then she dropped you. That hurt your pride, didn't it?"

Fletcher shrugged. "No big deal. I never liked her all that much anyhow."

"I think you did." Slowly, Bolt opened the evidence envelope. "I think we have proof that, long after she broke up with you, you kept a gift she'd given you. We'll come back to that. Miss Fenz said she screened replies to the Web site and never responded to mail

from campus addresses. But your family lives in town; you must have an e-mail address at home. That's why, when given the task of finding someone to initiate your less experienced pledges, you could make an appointment with one of the young women pictured on the Blue Elegance Web site. It's no wonder you found her attractive. And it's no wonder your pride was hurt more deeply than ever when you saw your former girlfriend standing at the designated meeting place, holding a copy of the *Atlantic* and a blue carnation. Were you infuriated, Mr. Cantrell?"

Fletcher just sat there rigidly, his mouth twitching between a grin and a snarl.

Bolt gazed at him, then nodded. "Probably not. It takes your fury a while to build, I see. And probably, at first, you just felt stunned. Maggie must have felt stunned too, but when you opened your car door, she got in. She trusted you, and she had a job to do. If her first customer was her old boyfriend, that made it easier. So you drove to Petite Falls, thinking it would be deserted at that time of night. You'd brought a bottle of Merlot—had you planned to ply the girl from Blue Elegance with wine, to get her to agree to initiate several bashful pledges? Did you try to dissuade her from continuing down the disgraceful path she'd chosen?"

Fletcher barely shook his head, barely opened his lips. "None of that happened."

"I wish it hadn't." Sadly, Bolt reached into the envelope and pulled out the key chain. "This was in Maggie's purse, loaded down with the sorts of trinkets many girls attach to key chains, a rabbit's foot, a tiny ballet slipper, a plastic flashlight. And this was in her coat pocket." He held up the gold-plated flashlight on the snap-apart chain. "Duplication—that's what the lieutenant said when he saw Maggie had one flashlight on her key chain, another in her pocket. Why would she carry two flashlights?"

Pamela was still standing next to Fletcher loyally, her hand resting on his chair. Now, she stared at the gold-plated flashlight, stared at him, and took her hand away.

"That's Maggie's," she said, her voice soft and, for once, too slow for incoherence. "Her parents gave it to her when she graduated from high school, and last year, on Fletcher's birthday, she gave it to him because she couldn't afford to buy a present. When she broke up with him, he said he'd always carry it with him as a symbol he still hoped she'd come back to him. She cried about it. Later, she bought a plastic flashlight, since she didn't have her gold one any more."

Bolt's eyes were sad with understanding. "Maggie wouldn't lis-

ten to you, would she, Mr. Cantrell? Disgusted, you tore the flashlight from your own key chain and hurled it at her. She put it in her pocket. Perhaps she said some taunting thing. Now, your fury erupted. You grabbed the back of her neck and struck her head against your dashboard. Perhaps you didn't mean to kill her. But when you realized what you'd done—"

Once again, Fletcher Cantrell III's fury erupted. Roaring, he leapt up, charging straight for Bolt. With a mighty yell, I snapped into a Jackie Chan stance, jumped in front of Bolt, tripped over the podium, fell down flat on top of it, and collided with Fletcher just as he surged forward, hands outstretched to grab Bolt's throat. Fletcher toppled over on me, his head bouncing down beyond my feet, hitting the floor, knocking him out. By the time he came to, Bolt had him handcuffed and was reading him his rights, cradling his Miranda card in one hand and holding out aspirin in the other.

That's pretty much it. After the coroner matched the mystery hairs on Maggie's coat with hairs from Fletcher's head, Fletcher, on the advice of his father's lawyer, pleaded temporary insanity, admitting everything happened just the way Bolt laid it out. The Pi Alpha girls confessed too. After our tech guy finally found the Blue Elegance Web site, they didn't have much choice. Bolt and I hauled them in on prostitution charges, but after the prosecutor and his staff questioned them—at the sorority house, and at a hotel suite he rented for the weekend because he wanted privacy for the interrogations—he decided he needed them for state's evidence against Fletcher. So he let them off with a warning. I was surprised he needed all the girls as witnesses, but lots of people think it's a good idea. The newspaper and the TV stations did stories about the plight of college girls forced into prostitution by the rising tide of tuition costs, and the mayor and the public safety commission made sympathetic statements. Don't think those girls will go unpunished, though. Dean Collard suspended their party privileges for one whole semester.

So that's why I took a firm stand with Kevin—and not just because I found out Blue Elegance had been sending weekly bulletins to old Miss Prichett. No, it's because I think it's time Kevin learned what loyalty really is, and what it really isn't. I mean, sure he wants to protect his Little League buddies. But shouldn't loyalty mean more than covering up for lies and bad behavior? Like Bolt pointed out, maybe those Pi Alpha girls thought they were being loyal to Maggie when they lied about the initiation, but really, weren't they mostly being loyal to themselves? Sometimes, claiming to be loyal can be a pretty good way of hiding selfishness. And

shouldn't Kevin feel loyal to Miss Prichett too? I know she's mean—I remember how she called me "faltering Walter" every time I messed up on a psalm—but she deserves credit for getting up early every Sunday, just to shove religion down the throats of ungrateful adolescents. So I told Kevin no Internet till he coughs up the truth. Ellen's so proud of me that she's dropping more hints about giving Kevin a sibling, but that's another story. Anyhow, Kevin's close to cracking. A few stern words from you might do the trick. If you provide them, you'll have the gratitude of

Your loving son,
Walt

Dear Kevin,

If you want my support on this one, you're out of luck. It's a tough situation, but tell the truth and let your friend take his punishment. In the long run, he'll be better off for not getting away with doing something wrong. Maybe he'll thank you one day. Well, maybe not. Don't worry about that. You're growing up so fast—just make sure you feel good about the kind of adult you're becoming. After all, before long you may have to set a good example for someone else who will also be very important to

Your loving
Grandmother

Solution to the December "UNSOLVED"

Greg Rand killed Artie Ulman.

FLOOR	CRIMINAL	SPECIALTY	WIFE	HAIR
11	Dan Tinker	counterfeiter	Lily	blonde
10	Burt Stubbs	arsenist	Kate	brunette
8	Elmo Quick	forgery	Helen	red
7	Artie Ulman	drug dealer	Nanette	brunette
6	Greg Rand	burglar	Ida	red
4	Fred Osler	gun for hire	Julie	blonde
3	Chet Pilcher	embezzler	Marie	brunette

THE STORY THAT WON

The July/August Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Benjamin H. Foreman of Harbor Oaks, Florida. Honorable mentions go to Ray Chabot of Waterdown, Ontario, Canada; James Hagerty of Melbourne, Florida; Rebecka Persson of Concord, Massachusetts; Judith Bell of Lynchburg, Virginia; Nancy Mallory of Wheeling, Illinois; Robert V. Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; Ricky Fluke of Hurst, Texas; and Shirley Stoddard of Binghamton, New York.



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CONNOISSEUR DIAMOND

BENJAMIN H. FOREMAN

"I'm sure that Hammer said to bring the dinosaur from Raymond City Museum to the corner of Hope and Trojan," Pierre said to himself.

He stood under a streetlight, checked his watch, tilted his head back, and stared into the mouth of the beast nicknamed Rex, admiring the fossil's sharp teeth.

"What a struggle I had getting this heavy piece of metal and plastic onto that low, flat, four-wheeled dolly, but I did it." Pierre's face lit up.

A full moon played peek-a-boo through the openings in a long string of clouds, throwing beams downward, creating shadows that bounced off buildings, looking like ghosts frolicking in a haunted house.

Pierre shivered, cupped his hands around his mouth, called out "Hammer! Hammer, are you there?"

Nothing. No sound. The street was deserted. Shops were locked up tighter than a bank vault at midnight. Pierre melted into the recess of a pawnshop doorway. His back pressed against the glass. His hand squeezed the rope.

"Think, Pierre, think," he mumbled. "What exactly did Hammer say to you?"

"Listen carefully, Pierre," Hammer had said. "No foul-ups, understand?" Pierre had nodded his head.

"Between the Tyrannosaurus and the Trojan Horse is the Connoisseur Diamond. It's half the size of the Hope Diamond, but it's still worth a million bucks. I want you to bring it to me. I'll be waiting one block away on the corner of Diamond and Horse Street."

Furrows deepened in Pierre's forehead. He looked up at Rex and mouthed an "Oh."

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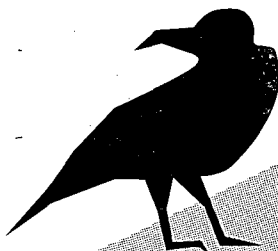
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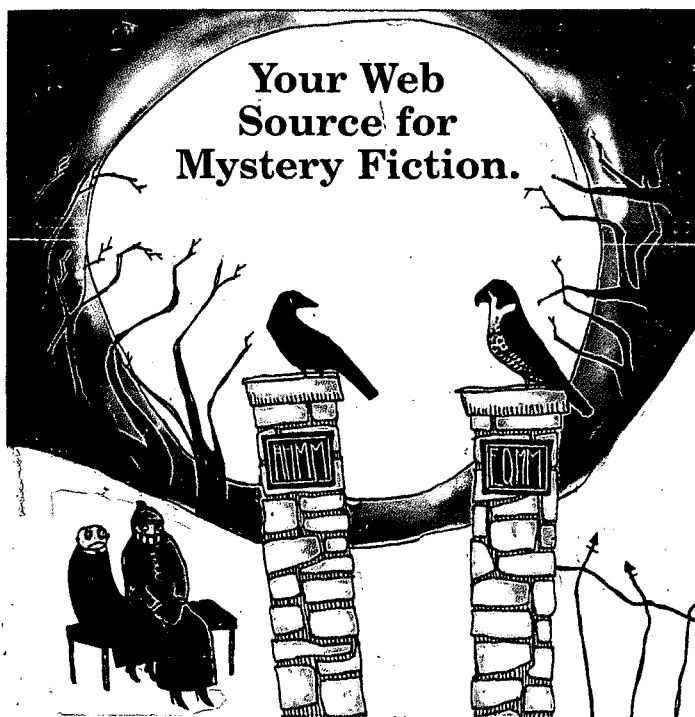
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